Bad at Love (Can You Blame Me for Trying) by bleepbloopbee

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Summary:

He liked to think the world was done throwing him curveballs. He's had to kill the Demogorgon, get his face punched in by a crazed stepbrother, listen to his drunk girlfriend tell him she doesn't love him, and tell his best friend that he's a piece of shit. He thought he had somehow managed to catch enough curveballs for a lifetime.
He was wrong.
The newest curveball may be the hardest one yet.

1. Everything Starts Somewhere

Author's Note:

> The beginning to this is going to be a bit of slow start... I started writing this and had kind of no clue where I was going until I hit chapter 3. And me being me, there's a fuckton of dialogue. Whoops.
> (Also chapter lengths are gonna be varied. I'm trying something different so some may be short and some may get long)

“As you walk further into the cave, it grows darker. You can hear the sound of water dripping, but the echoes make it hard to tell how far the cave goes. As you walk around a bend, the hair on the back of your neck starts to rise, and you feel something watching you…” Mike’s eyes dart between the party members. “Roll a perception check.”

They all groan, reaching for their die.

“We’re so screwed,” Dustin groans. “We barely got out of the last fight…”

“Maybe there will be nothing there?” Max tries to be optimistic.

“Knowing our luck, no.” Lucas rolls, and then slams a hand on the table. The table rattles. “ *A 1?! Are you kidding-* ”

“17.” Will smiles, only furthering Lucas’ annoyance.

Max rolls a 13 and Dustin gets a 8. Then, all eyes are on Steve, who sits in between Lucas and Max.

He sighs, rolling the die. It lands, and he laughs a little once he sees it stop.

“19.”

All of the kids either yell in annoyance or laughter.

“It’s his first perception roll and he gets a *19* ?” Lucas yells, making Max snort.

“Beginner’s luck,” Steve wise-cracks.

It’s a miracle he’s here. Dustin had been begging him to join them on their Friday night DnD games for *weeks* now. Steve’s been a little reluctant to join, since things have been a little bit rocky after their second round with the Upside Down. But he had finally given in, and the game’s proving to be more fun than he thought.

Across the table, Dustin grins.

“I’m so proud of you,” Dustin jokes, reaching across to pat Steve’s head. Steve laughs, and shrugs.

“I’m a natural roller.” He sits up, pretending to pop the collar of his jacket.

Mike’s watching from behind the dungeon master separator, quickly getting anxious to move on.

“Okay okay- you’ve all made your rolls…”

Steve pulls up to school early Monday morning. He’s not even pulled into a parking space yet and he’s already itching to leave. He already wasn’t a fan of going, but the whole Tommy-and-Carol-Falling-Out made it worse.

He gets out of his car, pushing his sunglasses up into his hair. It’s fucking freezing this morning, one of the last few harsh colds before spring slowly makes its way in. There’s clouds covering the sky and a sharp breeze. The weather seems to match his mood.

He keeps his hands shoved into his jacket as he crosses the parking lot. Dread pools in his stomach as he walks towards the school.

He enters the building, almost immediately getting looks. He's been getting them for months, since after his not-so-private fight with Tommy, Tommy decided it would be fun to start spreading rumors about him. It doesn't help that Billy's still around, sneering at him despite Max's strong warning.

There was a silver lining to the rumors Tommy was stirring up. Some of them were quite ridiculous, giving him a good laugh. Hell, the whole isolation-from-your-peers thing is somewhat helpful. He'd rather be friends with the kids than with assholes his own age.

He slips through the halls keeping his head down. He reaches math a few minutes early. He scans the room, and cracks a smile.

"Have a good weekend Byers?" He asks, dropping down into the desk next to Jonathan's.

Jonathan glances up from his notebook, where he's doing the homework last minute. Steve wishes he was doing the same, he didn't even *start* the homework.

"It was okay," he shrugs, licking his bottom lip. He then laughs a little. "Will was telling me all about DnD on Friday…"

He trails off, sending a knowing smile to Steve.

"It was fun." Steve shrugs a shoulder. "It's a little confusing, but I think I'll get the hang of it."

Jonathan chuckles. "It takes time to learn. They roped me in as a dungeon master when they first started playing."

Steve leans forward in his chair, grinning. "No way."

The thought of Jonathan being in Mike's place is pretty great.

"Absolutely," Jonathan nods. Steve looks at him in disbelief. Their conversation is about to continue, but the bell rings, cutting them off.

Steve groans quietly, turning to face the board. Math is probably his worst subject. He's barely scraping by with a D, and that's thanks to Jonathan. Jonathan's passing with flying colors, and is fortunately

helping Steve.

Steve glances over at Jonathan as the teacher starts talking. Jonathan is diligently taking notes, and Steve assumes he'll be left alone this period. With a long breath, he settles in, half paying attention to the board.

He can already tell that this week's going to be a long one.

The kids are already bickering about something as Steve walks up. They're standing by his car, talking about something silly. Steve rolls his eyes as he walks up.

"I'm telling you-" Lucas is cut off by Dustin, who is then cut off by Mike. Max stands off to the side, looking vaguely annoyed. Will is glancing between all of them like it's some kind of tennis match, but other than that, he's staying out of it.

"Hey Steve," Max greets him with a nod, which Steve returns. At his name, Dustin looks over, and waves.

"I thought I told you guys I can't fit all of you in my car." Steve crosses his arms, pursing his lips.

"I'm waiting for Jonathan." Will pipes up.

"Okay… so how about the rest of you?" He raises an eyebrow, pointedly glaring at all of them. They all sheepishly smile, even Max, *who's carrying a goddamn skateboard* .

Steve groans, running a hand over his face. "I'm becoming a soccer mom."

This gets a laugh from everybody, and Steve holds in a sigh.

"Okay, okay, just get in so I can cart your little asses home."

Steve unlocks the car, and everyone starts to pile in. Will wanders off after a minute, spotting Jonathan across the lot. Everyone else throws their bags in the trunk, and squeezes in the back. Dustin takes

shotgun; the other three have long since given up trying to take that from him.

“Can somebody explain to me why I do this?” Steve asks as he pulls out of the lot. “You all can walk, right? It's not that far of a walk”

“Says the guy with the car.” Lucas points out.

“But I’m *old* . You guys are all young and full of energy.” Steve waves his hand. “And what happened to taking the bus?”

The three in the backseat all share a look. Steve misses it, paying attention to the stop light they’re at. But w hen he’s met with silence, he shrugs.

“Okay, okay, I actually understand why the bus sucks.”

The light turns green, and he takes a left. Max’s house is closest to school, so she’s the first to go.

With the backseat and trunk empty, Steve finally gets home.

As much as he whines about carting the kids around, he’s pretty okay with it in all actuality. Since they’re all in middle school, he doesn’t see them as much as he gets to see Nancy or Jonathan, so driving them all home is kind of a nice break. Sure, he’s the one driving and can’t really put his full attention to the others, it’s still nice.

That nice little buzz holds on until he pulls into his driveway. There’s no cars parked outside, and none of the lights are on inside.

He holds back a sigh for what feels like the millionth time today. The pleasant feeling starts to fade. He doesn’t know why he expected anything different anymore. Being left to his own devices at home, and having to take care of himself is the new norm now.

He goes in through the garage, flicking on the kitchen light. He glances around, seeing if his mom had the decency to leave a note for him. When he turns up with nothing, he lets his bag slip off his shoulder and land on the kitchen island.

There are some days where he just wants to scream and let the emptiness of the house dissipate for a few seconds. There are some days he'd rather listen to the silence. There are some days where he gets sick of it all; today's one of those days it seems.

2. Movie Night

Notes for the Chapter:

> I'm going for a slow introduction to the plot (aka this is the beginning where i'm realizing my plot as i go)

The teacher walks through the room, passing out the tests. Steve watches her with dread. He had walked out of class the day of the test with his stomach in knots, and now it's starting to tighten back up as she makes her way over.

She passes by Steve, dropping off a paper. Steve catches the look of distaste. His eyes slowly fall on his paper, and he doesn't know why he feels disappointed. It was honestly better than he thought.

C- .

He was expecting a D, hell, even an F. A C- is better than his last few scores, but it definitely wasn't enough to make a difference.

Steve's eyes are locked on the red *C-* written at the top of his paper. At this point, he doesn't know why he tries. Jonathan's been trying to help him, but there really hasn't been any change. He doesn't know why he gets his hopes up.

The bell rings, pulling him out of his thoughts. Jonathan's already out of the room, hurrying to get to the next class. That leaves Steve alone as he makes his way to next period. He grabs the test and shoves it in his bag.

The halls are loud. Steve sticks to the walls, slipping through the crowd. An ache starts to grow behind his eyes. He slept like shit last night; he had woken up from a nightmare. It was the same one he's had nearly every night since November.

In the dream, he's back at the Byers, when there were christmas lights strung up all across the house and the alphabet painted on the wall, but there would also be patches of Will's drawings, looking like chunks of tentacles creeping up the walls. Him, Nancy, and Jonathan

were there, armed to the teeth. He wouldn't see the kids, but he could hear them yelling, hear them *screaming* . It would echo through the house like they were in a cave. Then the lights would start to flicker, and he would always look up in the middle of the living room. Above him, the ceiling would warp, taking the shape of the Demogorgon. As the monster was about to break through the ceiling, as if it was a tissue, he would wake up in a cold sweat.

It was the same nightmare. Had been for months.

It had woken him up in the middle of the night. The clock on his nightstand was reading three in the morning. It would take him another hour or two to fall back into a fitful sleep.

That lead to now-- an ache was growing behind his eyes and he just wanted to go to bed.

"Steve!" Somebody calls out his name, and he's almost tempted to turn and slam his head into one of the lockers. Maybe if he used enough force, he'd knock himself out and roughly half of his problems would be solved.

But alas, he couldn't.

"Steve." The person calls again. He holds in a sigh, turning around to face the person.

"Are you okay?" The person's Nancy, who's looking at him with concern written all over her face. God, Steve thought he was hiding it well…

"Yeah Nance, I'm fine," he waves his hand a little. "What's up?"

Her concern fades, and Steve feels a bit calmer. He's always liked talking to Nancy.

"Are we still on for movie night Saturday?" She asks.

Oh shit .

He had forgotten he agreed to that. How long ago had they made those plans…?

“Yeah!” He nods, trying to fake his enthusiasm. “Yeah, we’re still on… It’s you and Jonathan, right?”

“Uh…” Nancy trails off with a little laugh. That’s worrying. “Mike heard about it and roped the kids in…”

Steve felt the knots in his stomach loosen. He could deal with the kids. They were great, absolutely. It’s when it was just him and Jonathan and Nancy is when he started to fret. There were still lingering tension between the three of them. Not all of the issues between Jonathan and Steve had been ironed out, and Nancy breaking up with Steve put on more strain.

He could be around Nancy and Jonathan at school, for the most part; he was able to keep up a better resolve. Outside of school grounds is when he started to get shaky.

“Is that okay?” Nancy bites her lip for a second, bringing Steve out of his thoughts.

“It’s okay.” Steve nods. “The more the merrier.”

Nancy smiles. “Sounds great, I’ll see you Saturday!”

“Of course,” Steve smiles, waving a little as Nancy turns and disappears into the crowd.

He lets out a slow breath, letting his eyes close for a second. The headache is getting worse.

He allows himself a minute to relax, despite knowing that the bell will ring any second. But he can take his time, Mr. Larson always gets coffee from the teacher’s lounge before class and gets in there a few minutes late.

The bell rings, and he opens his eyes.

The halls are empty. It’s much quieter now. A weird wave of calm washes over him. He’s half tempted to just ditch, but he knows that if he doesn’t show for sixth period Jonathan will tell Nancy, who will tell him off.

He slowly turns, going to his next class.

The Harrington residence very quickly gets loud.

The second the kids arrive, they're yelling about claiming spots in the living room. Steve finds it kind of funny, biting his tongue and holding in laughter as he digs out some drinks from the fridge. His mom had left him some grocery money, so he was able to get some extra snacks for their movie night.

"I forgot to warn you how loud they get." Nancy says. Steve looks over his shoulder, his arms full of soda bottles.

Nancy's leaning against the door frame. She had driven Mike, Dustin, Max, and Lucas. They were just waiting on Jonathan and Will.

"I've played DnD with them," Steve stands up, nudging the fridge door closed with his foot. Nancy laughs softly, shrugging.

"Just hearing them from upstairs is crazy… I can't imagine being in the room." She takes a step into the room.

"It's fun," Steve laughs. "I don't really mind."

A soda nearly slips out of his hands, and Nancy suddenly lunges forward to grab it right before it slips out from under his arm.

"Shit, thanks," Steve quickly walks over to the counter so he can set down the cans before any more slip. Nancy follows him, sitting the one can down. She's about to say something, but she's cut off by the doorbell.

Steve breaks out into a grin. It has to be Jonathan and Will.

"You can go get that." He gestures to the other room. "I'll be right in."

Nancy nods, and she leaves. He watches her go, smiling warmly at her back.

It feels good, having the house full of noise and life. It's been awhile since he's had anybody over, and he wishes he had done this sooner.

They've been having movie night at Jonathan's for weeks, but Joyce asked for them to relocate for tonight. She claims it's for peace and quiet but the gang knows Hopper will be keeping her company for the night.

Steve's happy his house was the one they decided on. He almost forgets the weight of silence.

He strolls into the living room, hands full of sodas.

"I have arrived with drinks!" He calls out. Dustin's immediately got his hand in the air, reaching for a can.

Him and Mike have snagged the space in front of the coffee table. Lucas and Lucas have found their spots on one couch, leaving the other couch for Steve, Nancy, and now Jonathan.

Will takes a soda from Steve as he passes, thanking him quietly before moving to join Dustin and Mike on the floor.

As sodas get passed around, Jonathan comes up to Steve.

"Sorry we're late," Jonathan takes the last can from Steve.

"It's cool, we haven't started yet." Steve smiles. "Nancy's on the couch. You can sit with us… all the other spots are taken."

Jonathan cracks a smile. "Sounds good."

Steve and Jonathan plop down on the couch. Nancy's in the middle, Steve on her right and Jonathan to her left. If it was the three of them, he probably would've moved to the other couch, but the kids on the floor help him relax, despite the noise.

The movie starts, and everyone settles in. They're watching *Ghostbusters* again, despite this being probably the dozenth time

they've seen it since it came out. But the kids had insisted, and who is Steve to tell them no?

He can tell that they've watched it a bunch though, the boys are on the floor practically reciting half the movie to each other. Steve gets a kick out of it, laughing quietly with the other two on the couch.

"How often do they watch this?" Nancy whispers, trying to hold back a laugh as Dustin dramatically mimics an action scene.

"Twice a month, atleast" Jonathan deadpans. "But that's just at my house."

Nancy and Steve both laugh, receiving a glare from Lucas. Max glances over at them. She looks vaguely bored; while the movie is good, she's not exactly as enthralled as the boys are.

"We need to find them a new movie." Steve says. He shifts, putting his arms up onto the back of the couch.

"Is that implying that you're hosting again?" Nancy raises an eyebrow.

"Maybe," Steve shrugs, pretending to be nonchalant. Nancy can see right through it, bumping her shoulder against his.

"You're probably the only one with enough room for all of us."

"I only have one couch," Jonathan jokes, making Steve snort.

"It depends. If it's Ghostbusters, I might have to decline."

The three of them laugh, receiving another glare from the boys on the floor. The three of them quiet, and try to focus on the movie… it's a little distracting when they get to the ghost-busting parts and the three are being over the top with their acting.

Steve easily gets pulled away though. He can't help but glance around the room every few minutes. He can't believe they're all here.

It's been awhile since things have been this lively in his house.

Occasionally, his parents host dinner parties for work. They're stuffy, boring, and Steve does all he can to get out of them. But those parties mean his parents actually have to be home. It's been awhile since that's happened… and it's been even longer since he's seen his parents at home for more than five days at a time.

It's like the second Steve barely survived the Demogorgon, they started to fade from the picture. Taking longer work trips and vacations, excluding him from both. When the Mind Flayer came and went, the last shreds of them being in the picture disappeared. They leave him money for food, and that's about it. No grocery list to follow, no rules to follow, no curfew to be back for, no breakfast waiting on the table in the mornings before school… just left with money and an empty house.

He sometimes wonders what he has to do to get their attention again.

Does he have to let the last of his good grades slip into F's? Does he have to skip all together? Does he have to throw wild house parties that warrant a police visit? Does he have to start dealing drugs? Calling prostitutes?

He's ran through the questions so many times even the idea of them happening is boring.

He's just glad to hear voices other than his own in this house. It won't last forever, but he can treasure these moments while he still can.

Nancy's trying to corral the kids out the door, but it's like trying to herd cats. They're a bunch of chatterboxes, and Steve is *definitely* not helping. He's egging them on about something stupid. The movie ended and they all lounged around for a bit. Dustin and Max raided the kitchen, bringing out an assortment of snacks. That had lead to even more lounging around, and it was reaching a few kids' curfews.

She finally manages to get them out in the direction of the car, and

she turns to Steve. They're standing on the porch. It's cold out, and Nancy's shivering. Steve almost wants to pull her back inside so she can warm up.

"You're an idiot, Steve Harrington." She says, cracking a playful smirk.

"What? What did I do?" Steve holds up his hands in surrender. "I'm just being an entertaining host! Your mom would be so proud of me-"

"Even my mom knows when it's time to wrap up the party." Nancy cuts him off, rolling her eyes. Steve shrugs, leaning against the doorframe.

"I had fun tonight."

"We all did." Nancy shifts her weight, pulling her sweater sleeves over her hands.

The two of them look at each other for a few seconds. Steve feels something warm in his chest.

Then, Mike yells at Nancy from the driveway.

" *Nancy! Come on!* " He's half out the car, yelling from the passenger seat.

Nancy jumps a little, and turns to look at her brother.

"I gotta go," she sheepishly smiles. "It was fun."

Steve nods, laughing softly. "I think I'm the go to for movie night now."

Nancy's smile grows, and she nods. "Absolutely. Goodnight Steve Harrington."

"Goodnight, Nancy Wheeler."

Somebody must've said something funny in the car. He can hear them all laughing from the porch. The two of them share a smile, then Nancy turns and steps off the porch. Steve watches as she

crosses the lawn to the car and gets in.

Once her headlights disappear down the street, he steps back inside. It's warmer inside, but the atmosphere feels colder now that everyone's gone. It's back to being all the wrong kinds of echoey; the kind where any noise you make comes back to haunt you.

The warmth in his chest fades. He shivers, even though it's warm.

3. The Dream

Notes for the Chapter:

> I was going to post these weekly, but since I'm already writing chapter 8 I figured I could post these a little closer together.

Steve finds Jonathan in the photo dark room before school starts on Tuesday. Steve had had the curiosity to knock for once, saving Jonathan from getting surprised.

“Come in,” Jonathan’s voice is muffled through the door. Steve pushes it open, quickly slipping in and shutting the door behind him.

The room’s dark, eyes unadjusted to the sudden change. The red glow doesn’t help. Despite how often Steve is here with Jonathan, he never quite got used to the eerie glow. It makes everything look sinister.

Jonathan’s doing his work, his back to Steve. He’s humming some tune, but it’s unrecognizable to Steve.

“What’s today’s batch?” Steve asks. He keeps his voice lower, feeling a little awkward about disrupting the calm peace of the room by talking.

“Nothing special,” Jonathan shrugs, carefully hanging up a picture. The color is starting to develop, and Steve sees the outline of Joyce on the couch. He looks at the ones already hung, and sees more pictures of the Byers. There’s one of Will bent over his desk, drawing something. One of Joyce at the stove making dinner. There’s two of those, but one has Hopper stepping in behind her.

“I think the Byers are pretty special.” Steve says, looking at Jonathan out of the corner of his eye.

Jonathan shrugs a little. “I’ve taken more exciting ones.”

“You know what they say, not everything has to be exciting.” Steve raises an eyebrow.

“I doubt somebody said that.” Jonathan looks over at him finally.

“You know what I mean.” Steve waves a hand. “Besides, I think I’ve had enough excitement to last me a lifetime.”

Jonathan smiles at that. “Yeah…”

Silence falls between them again. It’s not awkward, though. They’re so used to spending time together in peaceful silence in here that the lack of conversation is actually comforting.

It’s nice to watch Jonathan work. He’s fluid in here, moving with well practiced ease. He’s comfortable, which is a good sight to see. Steve’s noticed over the past few months how pent up Jonathan gets. During school his shoulders tighten up, he keeps his head low, and eyes even lower. All of that tension fades in here, and Steve wishes he could take a photo of that change.

Their peace is interrupted by the bell.

Jonathan lets out a heavy sigh, and starts to clean up what he’s doing. Steve steps back, letting Jonathan take care of things. (Once, he had tried to help… and it’s safe to say that he’ll never be messing with any of the chemicals in here.)

“Ready for math?” Steve asks as they step out of the dark room. Both of them blink a few times, trying to adjust to the sudden light change.

“Ready as I’ll ever be,” Jonathan exhales. Steve purses his lips, looking at Jonathan.

The fluorescent lights makes him look exhausted. There’s bags under his eyes. Worry starts to settle in his stomach, but he doesn’t have time to ask as they walk off to class.

“You got a C-?” Worry creases Jonathan’s eyebrows, and Steve suddenly regrets bringing it up.

It’s just the two of them at lunch today. Nancy’s got a test to retake. That means that it’s just the two of them at their table… which

unfortunately draws some attention to them from Tommy's crowd.

He can feel eyes on his back every few minutes. He doesn't look over; he doesn't want to see Tommy's smug face.

"I don't want to talk about it," Steve looks down at his tray so he can avoid Jonathan's gaze.

Jonathan sighs heavily, running a hand through his hair.

"I thought tutoring was helping?"

"I thought so too." Steve bites his bottom lip, pushing his lunch around on the tray. Jonathan purses his lips into a flat line. He looks disappointed, and Jonathan can't tell if it's at himself or at Steve. He chose the latter. He'd rather have Jonathan be disappointed at him than at himself.

"I could ask Nancy if she could help… She'd probably be better than me." Jonathan glances up from his tray.

"No it's fine-- you're a great tutor… I just suck at taking tests." Steve shrugs half-heartedly shrugging.

That's the truth, for the most part. The other part was that he didn't know how he could be around Nancy, *alone* . The two of them have yet to spend any time alone since their breakup. Jonathan or the kids have always been around, keeping them from talking about anything their breakup.

Yes, the pain has faded. But no, he doesn't think he wants to talk about it still.

Hell, he's a little embarrassed. If Dustin hadn't been there the day he went to apologize, he would've apologized to her-- and what the fuck did *he* have to be sorry for?

So probably the main reason he didn't want to talk about it is because he didn't want the possibility of Nancy making it sound like it was his fault. None of it truly was. He had tried to be a better person after ditching Tommy; he had tried to get her to stop drinking that night; he had tried to talk to her the next day…

He had done all he could. He didn't want to think about Nancy blaming him, so he figured it was best to just not talk about it.

"There's a quiz in a few days." Jonathan seems a little suspicious, but he decides to not push any further. "I'll find you a new tutor if-"

" *It's okay Jonathan* ," Steve says with a more stern tone, effectively shutting up Jonathan. "Don't need to worry about me, okay? A C- is the best thing I've gotten for weeks, so something's gotta be working."

His gaze is flat as he meets Jonathan's eye.

"Everything's fine." He says with some sort of finality, and Jonathan really has no other choice but to nod in agreement.

The week passes like he was swimming through molasses.

But Friday eventually comes, leading Steve to the Wheeler's basement, with a bunch of middle schoolers.

The more they play DnD, the more he gets into it. Dustin's told him he's kind of shocked by how much Steve enjoys playing, but Steve just shrugs it off with a laugh.

Steve assumes it's the mock-action of the game that's comforting. Going from 'saving-the-world-from-other-worldly-creatures-twice' to the same mundane daily schedule is a rough mix. Playing as a warrior in a mythical land helps… he thinks. He's not entirely sure, but he thinks questioning something this good is kind of stupid so he doesn't bother thinking about it too deeply.

"Hate to cut things short but I gotta go." Max sighs, slipping on her coat as she stands.

"Need a ride?" Steve asks.

“Nah, Billy’s getting me tonight.” She says, and Steve’s stomach rolls over. *God* , he likes to forget that Max is technically related to the guy. He’s backed off considerably since their big fight, but just the mention of him makes him feel like he’s blood’s about to boil.

“Okay,” Steve swallows his momentary anger, nodding. “See ya later.”

Max nods, saying farewell to her friends. Once she leaves, things naturally start to wrap up. They finish their round of rolls, start to get things packed up, and figure out how they’re all getting home. Dustin’s spending the night with Lucas, whose mom’s on the way, and Will’s being taken home by Jonathan.

Steve starts to head upstairs, pulling his keys out from his jacket pocket. He steps into the kitchen, about to turn into the living room when Nancy suddenly appears.

“Can I talk to you for a second?” She asks, resting a hand on Steve’s arm. Steve has to fight himself to not look down at it.

“Yeah, sure,” He says, trying to not sound nervous. She had come out of nowhere… what could she want?

He lets her lead him into the dining room, away from her family. The lights are dimmed and Steve’s nerves grow.

“W-What’s up?” He stutters a little, but tries to play it off.

“Jonathan’s worried about you.” Nancy has never been one to beat around the bush. In most cases, Steve loves that about her. *In most cases* .

“What?” He raises an eyebrow.

“Jonathan’s worried about you. He told me you’re not doing well in math and being distant.”

Her hand is still on his arm. They’re standing close.

Steve swallows thickly. There’s something he doesn’t like about the two of them talking about him like this behind his back, but he can’t

pin exactly what's bothering about it.

"Everything's okay." He says, shaking his head a little. It's obvious she doesn't believe him.

"I know you," she keeps her voice quiet so her family doesn't overhear. "Something's wrong."

There were a *lot* of things wrong. His parents have abandoned him, he has no plans for the future, he's failing half his classes, graduation is just a few months away-- the list goes on and on.

"Nothing's wrong, I promise." Steve licks his lips, then he smiles. "Everything's perfect."

Nancy's hardly convinced, but she knows that the chances of her getting anything else out of Steve is slim.

Her hand slides off his arm. She sighs, and glances into the living room. Her mom is on the couch, watching tv, while her father sits in his armchair reading the newspaper. She looks back at Steve, and nods.

"Okay… Have a good night Steve."

There's no last name, and Steve feels like he's fucked things up. Knowing his track record, he assumes he has.

"Goodnight Nancy." He smiles weakly, then turns and walks out of the house.

The dream is different tonight.

Instead of the Byer's livingroom covered in christmas lights and Will's drawings, it's his living room. His living room looks normal. No bear traps in the hall, no busted open wall, no marks of the Demogorgon.

Just the nice hardwood floors, pristine white couches, and impersonal cleanliness.

Nancy sits on the couch, watching some on tv. For a second, the image is so realistic that Steve thinks he's awake.

He walks over to the couch, plopping down next to Nancy. She immediately curls into him, throwing her legs over his lap and resting her head on his shoulder. But instead of freaking out and shoving her off, he lets out a relieved breath and pulls her close. An arm is around her waist.

She's focused on the tv, but all Steve can focus on is her. Her warmth. Her comfort.

He missed this, but right now it feels like nothing ever changed between the two of them.

They gravitate towards each other naturally, lips connecting.

He missed Nancy's kisses. They were warm, welcoming, and just teasing enough to have him wanting more. The heat easily builds. The kisses get short, becoming little teasing nips.

He slides his hands up her thighs, to her hips, then to her sides, up until they're tangled in her hair. Her hands to the same, ruffling his near-perfect hair. She pulls him down with a hand on his jaw and in his hair. The kiss breaks for a second as she lays back, pulling Steve on top of her. A wicked grin is on her lips, and Steve happily leans back in.

Their hands shift. Steve's plant themselves on the couch above her shoulders. One of Nancy's is still in his hair, the other is resting on his hip.

They're about to kiss again when a familiar, airy laugh cuts through the living room.

Steve snaps up, expecting to see a parent standing in the kitchen doorway. But instead, it's Jonathan.

"Couldn't wait for me, could you?" He raises an eyebrow. Steve is

speechless. There's a smirk on his lips.

"You were running late." Nancy props herself up on her elbows. She's casual, as if it was normal to be interrupted like this.

"I'm here now," he crosses the living room, pulling off his jacket. He tosses it on the other couch as he passes. He comes straight up to Steve, slipping a few fingers under his jaw. Jonathan tilts his head back, eyes warm.

"It's good to see you," he whispers, leaning in close. Steve feels his breath hitch-- their lips are so--

Steve wakes up sweating. His eyes shoot open, and he's suddenly upright. He takes deep breaths, trying to calm down. His thoughts are racing a mile a minute. His heart is thumping in his chest. His stomach is in knots. His palms are sweaty.

He slowly calms down. The deep breaths help, and he feels the tension slowly leave him.

Once his mind slows, he's left with one thought.

What the fuck ?

Well wait, make that two.

Do I love them?

He liked to think the world was done throwing him curveballs. He's had to kill the Demogorgon, get his face punched in by a crazed stepbrother, listen to his drunk girlfriend tell him she doesn't love him, and tell his best friend that he's a piece of shit. He thought he had somehow managed to catch enough curveballs for a lifetime.

He was wrong.

The newest curveball may be the hardest one yet.

Notes for the Chapter:

so can you tell that this is where I figured out a plot? I kind of had no clue of where I was specifically going for the first two chapters, but it's all figured out now! I hope you guys enjoy the drama that's coming up!! c; <3<3

4. What To Do Next

Notes for the Chapter:

> this one was a little on the short side, but the next chapter is where things *really* start rolling!

Okay, so how the fuck was he supposed to face Nancy and Jonathan now?

He's flat on his back, surrounded by the nest of messy sheets. The clock on the nightstand reads four in the morning. A light late-February rain is tapping on his window. The breeze is making the tree branches sway outside. The soft hum of the heater rattles through the vents.

He's still sweating, despite kicking off the sheets.

How the hell was he supposed to face them Monday morning? He's gotten pretty damn good at hiding his emotions, but how in the hell was he supposed to keep a straight face?

He dreamed of kissing his *best friends, one of whom was a guy!*

Since Nancy had broken up with him, he's only had one sex dream about her. He doesn't count that, since it was the night of the Halloween party, and he had gone home horny and drunk… so it was bad enough that he was having a sex dream about her; it was even *worse* that Jonathan was involved.

But was he technically 'involved'?

He had pulled Steve in for a kiss-- but they didn't touch before Steve had woken up. Could that be counted as involved?

He's not sure, but he's trying his damned hardest to keep his breathing steady as he thinks this whole thing over.

Does this mean I'm… queer?

The thought kind of rattles him. He's never had any sort of interest in

guys. Not even a passing ‘oh he’s cute’ thought. *Nothing* . So where the hell had this come from?

He starts to itch for a cigarette, which is a little strange. He was never a serious smoker. Just a few every so often, yet he had kicked the habit around Christmas time. But there’s still a pack and a lighter stashed in his desk.

For a few seconds, he contemplates getting up and grabbing one. He decides against it after a minute. He’d rather lay in the dark, wallowing in confusion and doubt.

Steve doesn’t know how he’ll face them come Monday morning. He thought he had long since gotten over Nancy, but turns out he was wrong. He also thought he was straight as a board… but look at how that’s going.

He bites his bottom lip, trying to not think about that dream-kiss. Something starts to warm in his chest. He swallows thickly, assuming that he’s pretty fucked.

“You look like shit.” Dustin deadpans as he throws his bag in the backseat.

“Good morning to you too,” Steve’s voice is flat. He wishes he had chugged some coffee before leaving to pick up Dustin on his way to school.

It’s the ass-crack of dawn, Monday morning, and he spent most of his weekend laying in bed, in the dark, fitfully trying to sleep away the thoughts about the dream. Unfortunately he spent more time wishing he was asleep than actually asleep.

“What happened?” Dustin’s tone changes. There’s concern peaking in, and Steve kind of regrets telling Dustin about the nightmares for a second. For only a second though, since he remembers he told Dustin

since he was having some of his own.

“Bad dreams, stress, worrying about the future, not wanting it to be Monday,” Steve rattles off a list as he starts their drive to school.

Dustin looks a little annoyed, glancing out the window. But the look quickly fades, and he sighs.

“Spring break isn’t too far away.”

“Thank god.”

Once they get to school, Dustin goes in the direction of the middle school, leaving Steve to conquer high school alone.

Now that he’s alone and not distracted by conversation, the worries of Friday night start to creep back in. He doesn’t know what he’ll say, how he’ll play it off like everything’s fine and he *totally didn’t dream of kissing his two best friends and possibly had the realization he’s not exactly straight anymore.*

He’s worried as hell, but that’s an understatement.

Fortunately, he gets to math uninterrupted.

Jonathan isn’t there yet, so he sits in the room by himself. During his weekend-of-wallowing, he had forgotten to do his math homework, *again* . That’s one more F put in his gradebook, and he’s pretty sure there’s no salvaging his grade the second it hits March. Since he’s yet to hear back from the one school he applied too, he assumes it doesn’t matter ultimately.

He sighs, glancing around the room. Nothing’s changed all year. It’s been his same first period the entire year. Nothing changed, and nothing will probably change. He wishes that nothing changes between him and Jonathan and Nancy. He wishes that these weird thoughts will fade and all will go back to normal.

He drags himself through the morning classes. By the time he's walking into the cafeteria for lunch, he might as well be dragging his feet and swaying in exhaustion.

As much as he'd like to avoid Jonathan and Nancy until this blows over, he has nowhere else to go, so he weaves in between the tables to their little one off to the side. He had managed to avoid Jonathan in math by pretending to pay attention, but there's nowhere to go now.

Nancy's already at the table, multitasking by looking over some page in a notebook and eating a salad.

Steve plops down across the table from her. She glances up from her notebook, skimming once last paragraph before shutting it and pushing it off to the side.

"Have a good weekend?" She asks.

Steve knows it's an innocent question, but his stomach decides to defy him and twist up into knots.

"It was good," he lies. He internally congratulates himself for keeping his voice steady.

"Did you talk to Jonathan?" Nancy asks, and Steve swears he's about to start sweating.

What the fuck- can she read my thoughts ?!?

"About what?" It comes out more rushed than he had hoped it would.

Nancy gives him a weird look. "He's still worried about you."

Oh .

"Oh."

Nancy raises an eyebrow. "Are you feeling okay?"

"Yeah, yeah," he nods quickly. "I'm great."

She doesn't look completely convinced, but doesn't ask anything else. She continues eating her salad, looking up a minute later when Jonathan sits down next to her. A smile graces her lips, and Steve watches it form.

His stomach twists.

Thanks to that fucking dream, he's picking up on such small details. That smile. The warm look in her eyes. How she's greeting him nicely.

His eyes travel over to Jonathan, who has the exact same look. Yes, happy is a nice look on Jonathan, especially after everything that's happened… but this just doesn't settle well.

Dread starts to pool in his stomach, and Steve wishes a portal to the Upside Down would form under his feet and pull him in. He'd rather be in a different universe than sitting at this table, watching the two of them laugh at something he'd excluded from.

They're just giving each other these god *damn* looks. It's so painfully obvious that they're in love, and thanks to this damn dream, he's not all that happy about this. If you had asked him a few months ago, *hell,* before Friday night, he would've been happy that these two are in love. He would've been happy that Nancy has moved on, that Jonathan's finally found somebody… but because of one stupid dream he's upset, possibly angry.

Angry because he thinks he's in love with his best friends, and his best friends are in love with each other. He's not sure when these two started falling in love, but he has the inking suspicion that something happened that night they went to the private investigator. They never told him all the details, but now that he thinks about it, they came back that night acting a hell of a lot closer...

He doesn't say much during lunch; he doesn't know what to say as he watches his best friends (*crushes?*) share warm, unknowing looks.

The tv is white noise as Steve lays across the couch. He's flat on his back, staring at the ceiling. A half-empty beer sits on the coffee table, along with a dying cigarette in the ashtray next to it.

At this point, he doesn't know what's playing on the tv, but he couldn't care less. The ticking of the clock above the fireplace is monotonous and slowly driving him crazy. But he doesn't want to move, really.

He doesn't feel the need to climb the stairs and crash into bed. It's not like his parents are home to shoo him off the couch. He can pretty much do whatever he damn well pleases; right now, he's just barely content with lounging on the couch.

Slowly, his eyes slip shut. In between school, stress, and the nightmares, his sleep is getting worse and worse. He feels constantly tired now-n-days. He can't wait for summer to come, ready to sleep the days away. He's also dreading it, since that means he'll be a high school graduate with zero plans for the future.

It's a blessing and a curse.

The show on the tv changes, and he starts to drift off.

The sight of christmas lights greets him in his dreams.

Notes for the Chapter:

> can I say that you guys are incredible? I'm going through some real rough shit right now and coming home to see the hits and kudos going up and reading your comments makes my day! Ya'll are incredible, and I'm so unbelievably happy you guys are loving this <3<3
> okokok my tacky thank-you is over, enjoy what's to come!!!!

5. Shit Stings

March hits with a long rain in Hawkins. It started raining the last day of February, and hasn't stopped for four days. They're all getting tired of the rain, but there's no end in sight just yet.

"The rain's ruining my hair," Steve drums the steering wheel.

"Awh," Dustin frowns. "That sucks."

"Hey-" Steve glares at him.

"I didn't mean it like *that* ! Jesus Christ," Dustin rolls his eyes.

They're sitting in the parking lot, waiting for the bell to ring. Usually, they'd loiter outside his car, but thanks to the constant drizzle, they're sticking to sitting inside until the bell rings.

"It sucks. How are you supposed to attract the ladies without the hair?" Dustin jokes, glancing over at Steve.

Steve, even though he doesn't want to, stiffens at the joke. Dustin's watching him, and notices him tense up. Concern leaks onto his face, and Steve wants to implode.

"You okay?"

Jesus Christ-- Steve holds in a groan. He shifts in his seat.

"Yeah I'm great." Steve's been using that excuse a lot lately, and he's fully aware of it.

Dustin doesn't look convinced. Damn kid is perceptive.

There's a long pause between the two of them. The rain lightly drums against the windows.

"Is it Nancy?" Dustin asks.

Steve jolts. Dustin's more perceptive than he thought.

"Where the he-"

"Is it Nancy?" Dustin repeats himself, cutting off Steve.

Steve's tongue pokes out, wetting his lips. His eyes are forward, looking out to the parking lot. Dustin watches him carefully.

"Yeah," Steve exhales, finally. Out of everybody he is close to, he trusts Dustin the most. He knows the kid's loyal, and won't spill.

"Jesus…" Dustin whispers, running a hand through his hair. He glances out the window, unsure of what to say.

"Yeah I know kiddo." Steve drums his fingers against the steering wheel. "I think she's with Byers… or at least loves him."

Dustin bites his lip, and looks a mix of concerned, worried, and upset.

"It wasn't your fault, right?" He asks. Steve's eyebrows furrow in confusion on where Dustin is going.

"Remember, when you brought her roses after you guys had that fight? It wasn't your fault, right?"

"It wasn't…" Steve's still confused on what he's trying to say. "What are you trying to tell me?"

"You still love her." For a middle schooler who's never been in a relationship, Dustin seems like he knows what he's talking about. "You still love her, since she broke up with you. She said she didn't love you, so she moved on."

Steve lets a quiet sigh slip from his lips.

"That doesn't exactly help me."

"It doesn't."

"You're a great motivator. You could become one of those tacky motivational speakers." Steve drawls.

“What do you want me to do? Push you to ask her out?” Dustin raises his eyebrows.

Did he want that kind of advice?

“Yes? No? I don’t know--” Steve throws his hands up. “I don’t know what to do?”

The bell distantly rings, and Dustin sighs heavily, leaning into the backseat to grab his bag. He’s about to open the door when he pauses. He turns to Steve, pointing a finger at him.

“Look, we’ll finish this later. Just act normal, okay? We’ll figure this out, like we always do.” Dustin tries to be assuring, but it hardly works.

Steve half-heartedly waves at him, watching as the kid climbs out of the car and rushes across the lot to the middle school.

He sighs, now alone. He doesn’t have a fucking clue on how to ‘act normal’. Whatever shit he’s been pulling off for the past week seems to be working; he doesn’t think Nancy or Jonathan suspect anything. Then again, he likes to think he’s good at hiding his feelings.

He steels himself, running a hand through his hair. The drizzle outside doesn’t stop; soaking him in seconds as he rushes across the lot to school.

It feels like a little bit of the weight has been lifted off his shoulders now that Dustin knows; but only a little bit.

Unfortunately, where some weight is taken off, another is put on. Now that it’s March, things are a flurry of preparations for graduation in May. Nancy and Jonathan have another year, so it’s just Steve caught up in the whirlwind.

On the table sits an unopened envelope. The address reads from Indiana State. It's the one and only college he applied to. This is it, essentially the determining factor of his next four years.

Steve stands above it, staring down at it with some level of distaste.

It's just him today; parents are gone once again. He wishes they were here for this. So they could celebrate if he got in, or help lick his wounds if he didn't. But it's just him and this stupid letter.

If he got in, he doesn't even know what to study. Nothing has captured his attention, pulled at his gut, told him to follow this path. It's not exactly the most desirable option… but if he didn't get in? He assumes he'll be here for the rest of his life; stuck in tiny Hawkins, Indiana. He doesn't think he likes that option either.

Well, it's now or never .

He sighs, picking up the letter and ripping it open. He unfolds it, scanning it.

" *After careful consideration, we regret to inform you…"*

Steve doesn't finish reading. His hands clench, crumpling the paper. His jaw locks, and without a moment's hesitation he balls it up and launches it across the kitchen. It uselessly bounces off a cabinet, falling to the floor.

"God *dammit* -" he curses, kicking the leg of one of the chairs. It screeches as it shifts across the floor. His toe aches. "God *dammit!* "

His hands turn into fists in his hair. His shoulders are tight. His nerves are fried. His voice echoes around the house.

He steps away from the table, back hitting the wall. Clumsily, he slides down until he's sitting on the floor. The balled up letter is a few feet away. He glares at it. All he can think about is how his ticket out of Hawkins has been denied.

He's going to be stuck in this hell forever, forced to keep reliving the

memories while everyone else moves on.

“You got rejected?” Nancy pities him, he can tell.

“Yeah,” Steve swallows thickly.

They’re at lunch again, Steve on one side of the table and Nancy and Jonathan on the other.

“Oh…” Nancy trails off. Jonathan hasn’t said anything yet, watching Steve intently. The expression on his face is incomprehensible. Steve assumes there’s pity in there too. He doesn’t want pity.

“It’s fine, I can probably still work for my dad…” Steve sighs. He hasn’t spoken to his father since early February, nearly a month ago. But he assumes his father will still hire him. He seemed all gung-ho a few years ago about Steve continuing the family business...

“You should still go to college.” Nancy says, concern threading into her words.

“Why bother if I don’t know what I’m going to study? If I’m just going to end back up here what’s the point.” His voice is so flat with exhaustion and frustration that it doesn’t come out as a question.

Nancy and Jonathan share a look, making Steve’s stomach do somersaults. He still hasn’t forgotten his dream; still hasn’t stopped noticing their actions towards each other. There’s something else hidden in that look, and it pains him to not know what. He’s left on the outside of things between them.

Silence falls, making the atmosphere between them thick with tension.

Steve holds in a sigh. He kind of regrets saying anything about this. Sure, this conversation would’ve ended up happening eventually, but he can’t stand Nancy’s pity-look and Jonathan’s silence.

“At least I’ll be here for your senior year,” Steve whispers.

Nancy looks startled, for some reason.

She must remember the conversation they had, back when they were still dating. Steve had been working on his college essay, nearly giving up because it wasn't good enough. Hell, that's why he only applied to one place. If he could barely scrape together one application essay, how would he answer another prompt on another application?

But he had said something about staying in town, being their for her senior year. Since their break up, he assumed that sentimentality had been forgotten. Her startled expression doesn't help. It worries him about what would've happened if he had gotten accepted. If he had gone to college, would she have forgotten him? Left him behind in the past, along with all of the other shit they've gone through together? He knows he'd like to forget battling the Demogorgon and the Demo-dogs, but he'd never forget Nancy or Jonathan. Never in his life would he want to forget these two.

"I guess," Nancy looks back down at her tray. There's some hesitance in her tone, making the words settle uncomfortably. Jonathan shifts, still staying silent.

The silence stings, and Steve loses the last of his appetite. He stares down at his half-eaten lunch, and swallows thickly.

Just when he thought there was enough strain on their friendship, he had to dump the news of the rejection.

God, what happens when I tell them that I-

He snaps at himself in his mind.

Tell them? Jesus Christ that's crazy. Never gonna fucking happen buddy!

The bell rings, jolting Steve from his thoughts. He wastes no time leaving the cafeteria. He leaves behind Nancy and Jonathan, only thinking about Nancy's hesitance. Why would he tell them that he loves them if they seem to barely enjoy his company? It'd ruin the last few relationships that he has.

Avoiding the two for the rest of the week was kind of easy.

Besides math with Jonathan, he had no other classes with Jonathan. He had zero classes with Nancy, since she was in all honors.

It was even easy to avoid her as Steve showed up at the Wheeler's for DnD night. Mike had let him in and led him down to the basement. Nancy was nowhere in sight, but he had seen a light on in her window as he walked up the driveway.

He hadn't really *wanted* to ignore them, but he didn't really have any other option. He didn't know what to say to them, and they hadn't come up to talk to him yet so… he had ended up avoiding them.

He had gotten there a little early; only Mike, Dustin, and himself sat in the basement. Mike was still setting up, and Dustin had already acquired some sodas. He'd left them in a small pile that sat on the edge of the table. Steve took one as he sat down.

"Where did we leave off again? Didn't we just finish fighting that dragon?" He asks, cracking open his soda.

"Yeah," Dustin nods. "I thought the dragon turned into something else though?"

Mike has a mischievous look in his eye. "I guess we'll find out…"

Steve and Dustin share a disdainful look. They're about to speak but Lucas and Max come thumping down the stairs, hauling grocery bags loaded with candy.

They're taking a short break for snacks and drinks when Steve wanders upstairs. He had made the excuse of using the bathroom, but he wanted to go up and talk to Nancy. He felt like apologizing, even though there was nothing to apologize for. Well, he could apologize for avoiding them, but that was kind of both of their faults… He at

least wanted to talk to her.

He passed the living room, barely noticing her parents watching the tv. They didn't glance at him as he went upstairs.

He gets to the top of stairs, hearing soft music and seeing warm light filter through her cracked open door. He walks up to her door, about to knock. But he hears voices inside, and pauses.

"I can't believe you…"

It's Nancy's voice. Steve's eyebrows furrow in confusion. Is she talking on the phone?

There's a quiet, familiar laugh, and Steve's eyes slowly widen. He recognizes that laugh--

" *Me* ? What about you? You look beautiful."

Jonathan .

Steve swallows, trying to force his heart down his throat and back to its normal place.

There's some more whispering, then the distinct sound of kissing.

Steve's stomach does somersaults. He glances down the hall, towards the stairs, then back at the door.

He should leave them alone, even if it kills him. Some part of him knew that they were together, but he tried his best to deny it. It was easier if they weren't together. He didn't feel left out when they weren't together, but now his heart stings with some kind of rejection. They hadn't even said anything yet-- but he already feels like he's been thrown out.

Another part of him was trying to be realistic, claiming that the chances of being with the both of them were slim, so he should just step back and let the two of them be happy.

And that's what he did. He stepped away from the door. He gave it one last look, then went back downstairs to rejoin the kids. He leaves

Nancy’s door behind, pushing his pain down and resolving to try and move on; he’d move on and let the two of them be happy.

He’s dealt with so much pain lately that he’s gotten pretty damn good at bottling it up.

Notes for the Chapter:

> I can't believe this is my most popular work of the year. This is awesome, and I'm so happy ya'll are enjoying this <3<3

6. Poolside

Steve drives Dustin home after DnD. It's quiet in the car, until Dustin sighs heavily and turns towards Steve.

"What happened?" He asks. His tone leaves no room for beating around the bush. "You came back downstairs depressed as hell. What happened?"

"I found Nancy kissing Jonathan in her room." Steve's voice is quiet and flat. It's almost covered with the sound from the radio. Dustin mouths a *'wow '*, and blinks a few times.

"Damn…"

"Yeah." Steve turns onto Dustin's street. "I just wanted to talk to her…"

Dustin knew about this week, and now Steve and Nancy and Jonathan were avoiding each other. All of the kids had noticed, and Mike was actually concerned. Mike rarely gets involved with whatever's going on with his sister, so him getting worried is a pretty damn big indicator.

"What do I do?" Steve asks, slowing to a stop in front of Dustin's house.

"I don't know." Dustin shrugs. He doesn't move to get out, keeping his eyes on Steve. Steve bites his lip, trying to not think about the stinging that's still in his chest. His eyes meet Dustin's, and he lets out a little sigh.

It's been a few weeks since he's had his dream. He's still thinking about Jonathan, just as much as he's thinking about Nancy. It's not just Nancy being with another guy that hurts, it's *Jonathan* . It's the two of them together, as a couple. He already felt like the third wheel or an outsider.

They've gone through something, which he was mostly left out of. They were the ones to create the plan to kill the Demogorgon-- he

had just come in at the last minute. They had gone to that journalist-- he wasn't even told they were going. They had found a way to get justice for Barb-- he only went to dinner with the Hollands.

Every step of their battle with the Upside Down was spent as the third wheel.

He was excluded from all of it. The realization of this stings, and his already slim chances of being with the two of them dwindled when he caught them kissing.

"I have feelings for Jonathan too." He doesn't regret saying that, even as Dustin's face twists up in confusion.

"What?"

"I love them both."

Dustin's face untwists, and he looks away. "What are you going to do?"

"I don't think there's anything I *can* do." Steve runs a hand through his hair.

"Well shit."

Steve snorts. "Yeah, you're telling me… I don't think he's queer."

"I didn't think *you* were queer." Dustin points out, cracking a smile. If anybody else had said that, Steve would've kicked their ass, but he knows that Dustin isn't saying it to be mean.

"Neither did I, but here I am…" he makes a sweeping gesture towards himself, "in love with my best friends."

"Stranger things have happened." Dustin jokes, making Steve laugh a little.

He's glad he's got Dustin. Had this been anybody else Steve would've A) never told them and B) the conversation would be a hell of a lot tenser. But Dustin always knows how to break the mood, bless him.

“Do you think I should tell them?” Steve asks a minute later.

“Depends.” Dustin shrugs. “I’ve never dated, so what do I know?”

Steve shrugs a shoulder. “I guess I’ll figure that out…”

Dustin nods, and starts to get his stuff together.

“If you need a wingman, lemme know.”

Steve laughs. “I will, trust me.”

Dustin cracks a smile, and opens the car door.

Steve returns the smile.

Dustin gets out, waving through the window before running across the lawn to his front door. Steve waits until he’s safely inside before he changes out of park and starts to drive home.

The rain finally breaks sometime in the night. The grass is still damp, but the rain has moved on and brought in warmer air. It’s time for winter coats and gloves to be packed away and clothes for warmer weather to be taken out of their boxes.

Steve rejoices by pulling the patio loungers out of the shed. He brings them to the poolside and sets up the deck umbrella.

He flops onto one of the loungers, kicking up his feet and leaning back. It’s not quite warm enough for shorts, so he wears jeans, a t-shirt, and a pair of sunglasses to top it all off. The warmth of the sun feels amazing after nearly a week and a half of constant grey skies.

While pulling out the deck chairs, he found a battery radio in the depths of the shed. Miraculously, it still worked and sat on the table playing some classic rock.

Birds are chirping in the distance. A gentle breeze is rustling the budding trees.

It's relaxing, and Steve lets his eyes slip shut. It was finally feeling like spring, and god he was tired of winter. He hated the cold, hated the drab grey of the season, hated the sharp air; he hated just about everything about winter. Even the snow. In Hawkins it never looked like a blanket of fresh snow. It seemed to always look like grey slush.

So spring was pretty much his favorite time of the year. Green blossoms overtake the grey, and the world starts to be colorful again. His mom's rosebushes are starting to bud red despite the neglect over the past few months.

The song on the radio changes, and Steve shifts, tucking his hands under his head. Guitar notes start up on the radio, hiding the sound of the gate creaking open and footsteps approaching.

A laugh makes Steve jolt. His eyes shoot open, and he bolts upright.

On the edge of the pool stands Jonathan, with a cheeky smile on his lips.

"Jesus Christ Byers," Steve gasps, putting a hand on his chest. "Scared the shit out of me."

Jonathan laughs a little and shrugs.

"Sorry." He gestures to the other seat. "Can I sit?"

"Yeah, yeah of course." Steve nods. He sits up more, pushing his sunglasses up into his hair.

He doesn't quite know why Jonathan's here, but he isn't exactly complaining. He hasn't spoken to them all week, and while he didn't know how exactly to act normal thanks to *certain feelings* , he'd be pretty lonely this past week.

Jonathan takes the lounger next to him, but he doesn't kick his legs up; only sitting sideways so he can face Steve.

"So what's up?" Steve raises an eyebrow.

“I wanted to see you.” Jonathan says. “Hardly saw you this week.”

Steve didn’t have the heart to tell him the truth.

“Been busy, I guess…” he shrugs.

Jonathan nods. He finally sits back, kicking his legs up onto the lounger. His eyes slowly scan the backyard, then land back on Steve.

Steve’s watching him carefully, noticing every minute movement. He seems to be doing that a lot lately, when his words run out he studies their faces. Jonathan’s got this quirk to a corner of his lips when he talks to them, and Nancy’s one to smile and look away; as if she’s shy of her smile.

Steve’s tongue pokes out, wetting his lips. There’s a gap in conversation, filled with the music from the radio.

‘It’s just another day when people wake from dreams’

“What are you going to do?” Jonathan asks, cutting through the music. Steve lets out a little sigh. He knows that Jonathan’s talking about the ‘got rejected from college’ thing.

‘ *The voices in their ears that will not go away* ’

“I don’t know.” He shrugs. “If I ever see my dad again, I guess I’ll ask him for a job.”

“ *If* ?” Jonathan raises an eyebrow.

“I haven’t seen him since February, so yeah, *if* .” Steve deadpans. He looks away from Jonathan, letting his head loll back against the lounger.

Jonathan blinks, and looks a little shocked.

“At this point I think he’s forgotten about me.” Steve says. He’s aware that he’s probably oversharing, but hell he gets tired of bottling it all up sometimes. And out of all the people that he knows, he assumes Jonathan will understand the most.

“Who can forget about you?” Jonathan asks. If it weren’t for the quiet seriousness in his tone, Steve would’ve snorted.

It was easy to feel forgotten when he had gotten left out of Nancy and Jonathan’s adventures, *and* had yet to tell him they’re together. But now wasn’t exactly the time to start voicing his grievances with them.

“Dunno,” he shrugs. “Maybe I’ll join the force.”

“The military?” There’s a weird strain to Jonathan’s voice.

“No, the police.” Steve shakes his head. “I know Hopper’s looking for somebody new.”

Jonathan slowly nods. He looks away, eyes moving to the pool as a leaf floats down and disrupts the smooth surface. Ripples move across the water, his eyes following.

‘*And just when I think-- that things are in their place’*

Steve swallows thickly. The silence is awkward, and he’s kind of glad the radio’s on to fill the silence. Neither of them know what to say, and Steve worries that these stagnant moments are going to become a regularity. He’s dealing with enough silence already.

‘The heavens are secure-- the whole thing explodes in my face’

Steve closes his eyes for a few seconds.

‘ *It’s just another day… It’s just another day.’*

They open. He looks over at Jonathan, trying to keep his breathing steady. As the silence between them stretches in, he scans the other boy.

For once, Jonathan doesn’t have on a jacket. Instead, he’s wearing a pair of loose fitting jeans, ratty shoes, and a black t-shirt. Steve can’t help but realize how the shirt tightens around his arms. He swallows, looking away.

Now’s not the time for homoerotic thoughts Steve , he scolds himself.

‘ It’s just another day… It’s just another day.’

The song starts to fade out. The final notes give way to the radio host starting to talk about traffic. He purses his lips. His eyes move away from Jonathan, and he leans over to the radio. He hits the off button and the radio cuts out. They’re left in the quiet rustle of the breeze shaking the trees.

“Nancy and I are dating.” He says suddenly, which appalls Steve. He freezes, half leaning out of the lounger.

“What?” Steve says breathlessly. In seconds, his stomach has tightened up. He sits back, unsure of what else to say.

“We’re together.” Jonathan sits up, tilting his body towards Steve. Steve wishes he didn’t do that. He wishes Jonathan stayed looking away from him. That would make this conversation much easier.

“We’ve been together since… since November.”

With harrowing realization, Steve realizes the timeline of what happened in November.

That fucking-- that god damn investigator --

“Oh.” Steve shifts, bending his knees and bringing his knees up towards his chest.

Jonathan’s eyes are still on him; Steve pointedly looks away. He wishes he had kept his sunglasses on-- he didn’t want Jonathan to see anything vulnerable.

“We didn’t tell you any sooner because we wanted to wait.”

“Wait for what?” Steve’s voice is tight. Pain flickers across Jonathan’s face, and he runs a hand through his hair.

“For things to get serious.”

Steve’s resolve starts to crack.

“I guess it’s pretty serious then.”

“Yeah… it is.” Jonathan slowly nods. Worry causes his eyebrows to furrow. Steve has yet to meet his eye. “Is it okay?”

First of all, since when did my opinion matter? He thinks bitterly. *Second of all-- Yes. No. Maybe. I don’t know. I’m not sure-- No--*

It comes out as:

“She never broke up with me.”

Jonathan’s eyes widen for a second. Steve finally looks up at Jonathan. For the first time in a long time, there’s a fire in Steve’s eyes. This was not how he was planning on taking this, but like he does more than he’d like to-- he spoke before truly thinking.

“What?” It’s Jonathan’s turn to be breathlessly confused.

“She never told me we’re through, that we were done.” The resolve’s cracks grow, letting anger seep into his words. “Did she ever tell you what happened at that fucking party?”

Jonathan is silent, so Steve barrels on.

“She got wasted. I told her to slow down and relax, but she didn’t listen. She spilled her drink since I was trying to take it away from her. I helped her into the bathroom to clean up, and--” he pauses to scoff, “and then she tells me that the whole thing was *bullshit* . That we shouldn’t be partying. That we shouldn’t be like this when Barb’s parents were selling their house for that fucking investigator. She called it all *bullshit* . She didn’t love me. Her words to me were ‘like we’re in love’.”

Steve can feel tears starting to burn his eyes. He hasn’t ever talked about this. Not even to Dustin. He had his talk with Nancy the following morning, then bottled the whole affair up and threw it into a deep well. He didn’t even cry when it was all over. He had immediately fallen in with the kid’s plan with the Demo-dogs, and by the time the whole mess was over enough had happened that he could easily forget about the night. He remembered Nancy trying to talk to him on the night they closed the portal, but he had shut her out. He didn’t want to talk about it then, since so much was going

on…

A this talk was dragging up those feelings he'd tried his hardest to forget.

"I talked to her the next day. You had taken her home, and she didn't remember… She thought it was me. When I told her what she had said, she didn't even fucking apologize. Didn't say anything."

Steve's fingers curl into a fist.

"We've never talked about it. You two fucked off and had your adventure. When you got back, we never talked about it. I just assumed things were over." He pauses, taking in a shaky breath. "So I guess things all worked out fine for you two. You're in love. Congratulations, I'm glad she found somebody."

It comes out sharp, bitter, ruthless.

Jonathan's too shocked to speak, even wince.

"Can't blame her… I was a pretty shitty boyfriend. But I at least deserve some fucking explanation."

Silence descends. Even the breeze has stopped.

A few beats of silence pass. Jonathan says nothing, does nothing.

All Steve can hear now is the drumming of his own heart. He steels himself, and looks directly into Jonathan's shellshocked eyes.

"You need to leave." His words are stern; they leave no room for discussion.

Without a word, Jonathan stands. He gives Steve one last look before rounding the pool and opening up the gate. He doesn't look back as he lets the gate swing shut behind him.

It's only when the gate creaks shut that Steve realizes how badly he's fucked up. He should've just been happy for them. He should've kept his mouth shut. He should've bitten his tongue. He should've said congratulations. He should've stayed out of it.

There were a hell of a lot of should've's. None of them were what actually happened.

Notes for the Chapter:

> i have an hc that steve loves Oingo Boingo, bc that's purely me pushing my love of the band on him lmao. If you want to know what song was playing, it's "Just Another Day".
> (and if you've got a stellar memory it was playing in i think episode one of season two??)

7. One Good Night

Jonathan isn't there in math Monday morning.

That's the icing on the cake.

Steve had spent yet another weekend wallowing in his house. After he had told Jonathan to leave, he was half tempted to kick the lounger Jonathan had been sitting on into the pool. He hadn't; instead he steeled himself and stormed inside.

(He regrets to say that that weekend he had gone through nearly a whole carton of cigarettes and a pack of beer.)

Now he stares at Jonathan's empty desk, itching for a cigarette.

He didn't even think about going to the cafeteria for lunch. It wasn't a thought, not even for a split second. Instead, he went and sat in his car. The window was cracked, soft music playing on the radio, and a cigarette between his lips.

He hated how this habit was back. The taste of cigarettes has always been awful, but a smoke takes the edge off. Since he feels like he's falling apart, he's picked up the old habit.

He doesn't bother blowing the smoke out the window. He just exhales and watches as it curled in the air and dissipates.

He hadn't eaten yet, but he wasn't planning on it. In fact, he hadn't eaten anything today, and hadn't really eaten anything on Sunday. Anxiety kills his appetite. It used to not be an issue, his anxiety. It rarely flared up… but that was before the Upside Down and the Demo-whatevers. Now anxiety was an issue just about every damn day.

A light in the school hallway would start to flicker and his skin would crawl. Screeching of the breaks of the school buses would make his shoulders tighten. The sight of multicolored christmas lights made him want to run. The crackling of fire made him dizzy.

Every damn day was a struggle, and he didn't understand why he seemed to be the only one still having trouble. Jonathan had eventually relaxed; he was more playful and smile-y now. Nancy started to smile more after having her revenge on the lab. The kids grew louder once more. Hell, even Will was looking healthier now-n-days.

He seemed to be the only one lagging behind.

Distantly, he hears the bell ring. The teens loitering around the parking lot all started to migrate back inside, but Steve made no move to join them. The cigarette burned out in his fingers, and he flicked it out the window. The second bell rang.

He was officially late for fifth block, but he couldn't care less.

WIthout really thinking, he started up the car. Giving the school one last glance, he backed out of his parking space and drove away.

There's nowhere he really needs to be.

He doesn't have a friend's house to go to. He doesn't have a corner booth in the local dinner his friends claimed. He doesn't have a little abandoned spot to go to. He doesn't want to go home.

Ultimately though, home is where he ends up.

He's about to pull into the driveway when he pauses.

There's a car parked outside. *Mom* .

At the same time, he feels both ecstatic and weary. He hasn't seen her since Valentine's day. It had been bittersweet; he was able to see her but she had also told him she was going to New York for a few weeks for work. He didn't even know what she did for her job. It was something… journalism? Publishing? He didn't have a clue.

He pulls in behind her, and turns off the car. There were lights on inside for the first time in a long time.

He had no idea how he was supposed to feel. Sure, he's kind of excited to know he won't be alone… but the bitter realization starts to kick in when he realizes he'll ultimately be left alone again. It doesn't help that he'll put a sour mood on things by telling her he got rejected from University of Indiana. Unless she dug through the whole trash can, there's no way she knows about the rejection letter. That'll leave things awkward when she eventually leaves again.

Taking a deep breath, he opens the door and gets out. He had driven around aimlessly for roughly an hour, so it wasn't quite the time school ended at. But since she never was home when he got out, he likes to think she doesn't know when school ends for the day.

He crosses the lawn, swallowing his nerves. The door was unlocked, and the second he opened it he could smell the candles his mom insisted on burning. It smelled like something floral and fruity and almost nauseatingly sweet.

The TV was on, but he could hear soft singing coming from the kitchen.

Almost nervously, he glances around his living room. Nothing looks different. Everything's in its place, so he doesn't know why he's expecting there to be some big difference.

"Stevie!"

He jumps, blinking a few times and turning around. His mom stands in the doorway to the kitchen. Nothing about her has changed. Her mass of dark brown waves still has faint streaks of grey. Her hazel eyes are still bright. Her face still holds the same warmth.

Nothing's changed, yet at the same time Steve feels like everything's changed.

"Hi… Mom…" He's sort of at a loss for words.

She acts as if she hasn't abandoned him in this too-big too-empty house. She comes up to him, sweeping her arms up and capturing him in a tight hug. Not knowing what else to do, Steve puts his arms around her with some hesitance.

"I'm sorry I didn't tell you I was coming back!" Her voice carries through the house. It's always been boisterous. She's short and stout; short legs and torso but wide hips and shoulders. Yet her voice can always fill the room, even if it's just the two of them.

When they hug, her hair brushes his chin and he has to tilt his head back to avoid getting it in his mouth.

"I was just so excited to see you," she chatters on. Steve used to be as talkative as her, when he was younger. But that was before everything happened.

"What about dad?" He asks without really thinking. The second it's out of his mouth though, he's regretting saying it.

She steps back, her arms coming up to Steve's upper arms. Her megawatt smile falters, and Steve knows there's something she's not telling him. He knows he won't get it out of her though, not right now at least.

"He's not here right now," her words take on a suspicious lilt. "I just wanted to see *you* ."

She insists, nodding once.

"I'm not intruding on any plans you've got, am I?" She raises an eyebrow.

Steve almost snorts.

What plans?

“No, you’re okay.” He shakes his head. “It was just going to be me tonight.”

Alone. Because you’ve basically abandoned me .

But he leaves that part out. Her smile doesn’t falter. She doesn’t say anything on the fact that she’s left him here for weeks on end.

And it never comes up that night.

They’re in the middle of watching some shitty movie on tv when the doorbell rings. Steve lets out a quiet, relieved breath. As much as he loves his mom being home, *god* does he hate her taste in movies. They’re cheesy romances and he’d rather watch *Ghostbusters* for the twentieth time.

Steve hops up off the couch with no hesitation. He calls out an ‘ *I’ll get it’* over his shoulder, and steps into the foyer to answer the door.

He swings open the door, ready to dismiss who’s ever at the door. But the words die on his tongue the second he sees who it is.

It’s Jonathan.

Now he feels like an idiot. He had dramatically swung open the door, then suddenly froze.

Jonathan, it seems, doesn’t know what to say either. His eyes are wide, as if he was expecting a different welcome.

“What are you doing here?” Steve’s voice is tight. His chest feels tight-- like he can’t breathe.

“I wanted to talk to you.” Jonathan’s voice is soft. He’s fidgeting with his jacket sleeves. If this were another situation, Steve would’ve found it endearing. Instead, he blocks out how cute he finds that, and takes a deep breath.

“Now’s not a good time.” Steve’s hand tightens on the doorknob. He’s just waiting to hear his mother’s footsteps behind him. He’s expecting

her to come up and ask who it is, or why he's taking so long.

"Please--" Jonathan's voice is just as strained. His eyes are pleading, and Steve wants to look away. But he tells himself to suck it up, and keeps his eyes on Jonathan's face; even when Jonathan looks away.

"I just-- just for a few minutes."

Steve's about to speak, but a yell from the house interrupts him.

"Stevie? What's taking so long?"

Jonathan's eyes shoot up, looking over Steve's shoulder and into the house. Steve winces.

"Just a second Mom!" He yells over his shoulder. Jonathan looks even more scared. Steve sighs, and steps out onto the porch. Jonathan takes a step back. The door shuts behind Steve, and they finally meet eyes.

"You didn't tell me your mom was home." Jonathan's voice is soft.

"Yeah, because it was a surprise." Steve sighs heavily. "Now, you need to leave."

"But--"

"We will talk later," Steve's voice is stern. There is no room for discussion.

He didn't want to talk about this in the first place, and now he *definitely* doesn't. He doesn't want to ruin one rare good night with his mother. Plus, if he's out there for awhile then he'll probably have to explain the situation to her… that's a whole can of worms he doesn't want to open.

"We can talk tomorrow, but *please* ," he says through clenched teeth, "for fuck's sake, let me have one damn night. That's all I ask. One nice night, then you can tear me a fuckin' new one bright and early tomorrow morning."

Jonathan's mouth opens and closes a few times, like a fish gulping.

Steve watches him, eyes stern and icy. A few emotions play across Jonathan's face, twisting it up a few times before he ultimately nods.

"Okay." His voice is nearly a whisper.

"Thank you," Steve turns, setting a hand on the doorknob.

Jonathan's face twists up now that Steve's got his back to him.

"Goodnight Jonathan," Steve pointedly says.

Jonathan winces. He says nothing as Steve goes back inside.

The door shuts, and Jonathan lets out a frustrated noise.

Inside, Steve is sitting back down on the couch.

"Who was it Stevie?" His mom asks, messing with the blanket sprawled across her lap.

"It was nobody Mom," Steve lies, taking the other end of the blanket and laying it across his legs, even if he isn't all that cold.

She nods, and puts her attention back on the movie. Steve tries his hardest to pay attention, but his mind keeps drifting back to Jonathan and the sight of him on his porch, so nervous he looks like he's about to start vibrating.

Notes for the Chapter:

> this one's a bit short but the next chapter's going to have some beef in it!! it'll be a fun one, i swear.

8. That Talk

Notes for the Chapter:

> Sorry about the few day's wait, I had finals! But now it's winter break for me, and I'm starting to work on a new stonathan fic c;

He ends up telling his mom about the rejection letter from University of Indiana after the movie ends. She's disappointed, he could see it in her face. She doesn't say anything about it. She fiddles with a loose string on the blanket, nodding slowly. She had told him that it was awful, but things were still okay. He could still find work.

When he had brought up working for his dad, that same look came onto her face the first time he mentioned his dad. Once again, she said nothing on it. She just nodded, and told him she'd help him sort things out. She said she was there for him, and Steve nearly snapped at that.

Where had she been the past few months? He had barely seen her all year, so what gave her the right to say that? What gave her the right to still act like his mom? As far as Steve knew, mothers don't abandon their children like this.

This is probably worse than just getting a divorce , he bitterly thinks.

He doesn't say anything instead. He just bottles it up, nods along, and excuses himself once their 'talk' is done. He says he has to study, which is a bullshit excuse. He can't study if he didn't understand the topic to begin with.

The recent strain between him and his 'tutor' had kind of fucked up his studying, but oh well. At this point, grades don't really matter to him. He just needs enough to graduate, then that shit doesn't matter anymore.

He gets upstairs to his room after excusing himself feeling nervous. Tomorrow's going to roll around, and he's going to have to face Jonathan, and probably Nancy too.

Dread settles in his stomach. That's been a pretty common emotion lately, and he lets out a frustrated sigh.

He's over 'dread' and 'anxiety'; yet judging by how things have been going lately for him, they're gonna be here for the long run.

It takes courage and a hell of an internal pep-talk to get himself into the school the following morning. For some reason, he's ready to have his ass beat.

He knows that Jonathan's against fighting, but for some reason he expects for Jonathan to appear out of thin air and just take a swing for his face.

His shoulders stay tight all day, ready to bolt if somebody comes for him.

It's already lunch and no sight of Jonathan. He wasn't in math again.

Steve decides to avoid the cafeteria again. He slips out one of the side doors, taking the long way back to his car. He doesn't think he'll skip the afternoon again.

As he walks, he digs through his pockets to find a pack of cigarettes and a lighter. Now that he's picked up smoking again, the habit is back on. It doesn't help that a smoke dulls the anxiety, even if for a few short minutes. Some relief, no matter how brief it is, is better than no relief.

He cuts between the little alley between the gym and the rest of the

building, lighting up the cigarette. He's taking the first drag when he hears footsteps behind him.

He takes a glance over his shoulder, half expecting to see Tommy. Tommy's been looking at him suspiciously lately, like he's a cat stalking his prey. Steve's been preparing for him to finally jump, even though he's not entirely sure what Tommy wants.

Instead of Tommy though, there stands Jonathan. Steve slowly exhales. The smoke curls in the air, and he turns to face Jonathan. He expects dread to fill his gut, but it never comes. He dosen't know if that's a good thing or not, but decides it's best that it's not there. Dread creates doubts, and that's the last thing he needs right now. No doubts. Just some form of confidence.

"Time for that talk, huh?" He says, the cigarette still between his lips. Jonathan doesn't say anything. He just walks up to Steve, stopping just a few steps in front of him. His face is a mess of emotions. Steve can detect worry, frustration, and hesitation. Everything else is incomprehensible.

"What happened?" Jonathan asks.

Well that's a vague question .

"What do you mean? What happened between me and Nancy? What happened last night? What happened last weekend?" The words come out sharper than he wanted them to. Jonathan winces, and Steve nearly does too.

"Last weekend." Jonathan crosses his arms.

"What's there to say? I told you what happened." Steve shrugs. He's no longer interested in the cigarette, so he flicks it onto the concrete. "All I can add on to that is that for months now, neither of us have talked about it. We just pretend like nothing's wrong."

He pauses, waiting for Jonathan to say something. He smashes the butt of the cigarette with his shoe. There's a beat of silence, then Steve continues.

"We don't talk about the Upside Down either. Nothing. Like we're in

some world were none of this ever happened." His tone is bitter.

Jonathan exhales, shifting his weight. "Why is that such an issue?"

Steve can't believe what he's hearing. He expected out of everyone, Jonathan would be the most strung up about this. His brother got hurt by this, *twice* .

Steve throws his hands up. "How can you all just easily move on from this!? I don't *understand* --"

"Isn't that what Nancy told you?"

Steve's eyes widen.

What the fuck .

For anybody, that was a low blow. But for *Jonathan* ? That had to be the meanest thing he's ever said. Steve's heart actually *throbs* .

His teeth clench up. He steps forward, into Jonathan's personal space.

"How fucking *dare* you," he says through gritted teeth. Anger is starting to well his stomach; rising up through his throat like some kind of bile. "I just want to *talk* about this-- about nearly dying twice, about saving the fucking world. And I can't because you all decide to go play happy-fucking-family and leave me in the dust."

"We're just trying to move on," Jonathan's starting to get annoyed. His words are clipped and there's a sharp look in his eye. "Trying to deal with it, just as much as you are. Not everyone is as chatty as you Steve."

Steve comes out sharp.

Steve's mind is telling him to *shut the fuck up* and *calm the hell down* but Steve just keeps on going.

"Chatty? I'm not asking you to constantly talk about this! All I want is just *one* fucking conversation. I feel like I'm going crazy! I have flashbacks, nightmares, fucking freakouts and you and Nancy just sit there looking all cute."

They've shifted closer. Only inches separate them, and neither of them realize this.

"Is this why you got so upset?" Jonathan asks. "Because you and Nancy never talked about it?"

Yes-- No--

"I don't know!"

Yes you do know.

He just didn't want to say it.

"Do you still love her?"

That's a loaded question .

"I don't know--" His words start to falter.

Jonathan doesn't say anything. Neither does Steve.

Steve is speechless, his anger faltering and the fight is starting to leave him.

This is where he becomes aware of the space between them, and their breathing. Steve's gasping for breath. Jonathan's breaths are sharp. The space between them is barely there. He doesn't know when they got so close, but he's aware of the space now. His eyes flicker down to Jonathan's lips for a second.

"What is going on Steve?" His name is softer this time. Steve's shoulders slump. For a second he feels like crying.

Too much. Anything and everything, all at once .

He lets out a little half-hiccup. The anger has burned away, leaving behind something rawer.

Jonathan's eyebrows furrow. His lips part, about to speak, but Steve cuts him off.

Without really even thinking about it, Steve tangles a hand in

Jonathan's hair and brings him in.

Their lips connect.

It's warm, a little rough, yet comforting. The last dregs of a fight wash away.

Steve feels raw hurt, like when your cuts have just stopped bleeding and all that's left is the nasty scrapes and pain. But the warmth and pressure of Jonathan's lips against his starts to heal the wounds. This feels like a dream-- like what would've happened if Steve hadn't woken up before their lips slotted together.

Jonathan makes some kind of noise, a little shocked. His eyes are wide and he freezes. His hands are at his sides, unsure of where to go.

Then, as sudden as it started, the kiss ends.

Steve realizes with a start about what he just did.

They're kissing. They're kissing *at school. They're kissing and literally anyone can walk up and see--*

He stumbles backwards, detaching himself from Jonathan. His eyes are wide, locking with Jonathan's in a second.

"Steve--" Jonathan's voice is airy. Steve swallows thickly. He feels like he's going to throw up. Something's rising in his throat.

He shakes his head furiously, keeping his lips clamped shut. He's scared that if he opens them he'll make an even bigger embarrassment out of himself.

It doesn't help that Jonathan's confused and worried look is making his stomach keep doing backflips.

"Steve," Jonathan tries again, taking a step towards Steve. Instinctively, Steve takes a step back. The motion makes Jonathan's face fall.

"I-I-" Steve stutters. His stomach lurches. He panics, not sure of what

to do. Without thinking, he whirls around and starts to sprint. He whips around the corner of the gym building and out of sight.

Jonathan doesn't follow him.

He doesn't know how he hasn't crashed his car yet. His hands are shaking. His vision is blurry with tears. His mind's in a million places. His legs are vibrating. All at the same time, he's on the verge of passing out, throwing up, or breaking down.

He doesn't even know where he *is.*

He had just gotten into his car and drove off. He can't see from the tears, but all it looks like is trees.

With a sharp yank of the wheel, he pulls off the road and into the grass. The wheels skid against the dirt, eventually rolling to a stop a ways away from the road. He hastily sets the car in park, and takes a few gasping breaths.

What the fuck did I just ***do?***

He leans forward, resting his forehead on the wheel. His thoughts are going a mile a minute and his breathing picks up.

I just kissed- he hiccups pathetically. *I just kissed Jonathan* --

A broken sob falls from his lips. His eyes clench shut. He takes a sharp, shaky breath.

What the fuck *have I done* ?

His hands clench the steering wheel as if it were the only thing keeping him grounded. It might've been. He feels clouded with panic and shame. He was already walking on thin ice with Jonathan, he just fucking blew it.

Ruined the last good thing he had.

The sobs keep coming, and Steve just lets go. Shakes and sobs rack through him. He's barely able to catch his breath. His nose is clogged with snot and his throat feels thick. It's difficult to breathe. That might cause him to panic more, but at this point he's too broken to tell.

Eventually, the panic attack fades away. The tears slowly dry. His hands loosen around the steering wheel. His thoughts slow. He still feels nauseous, but the aches in his gut have stopped.

Now he just feels lightheaded, and on the brink of falling asleep. Attacks like this always wipe him out.

Slowly, he lifts his head. The violent sobs have left him with an ache behind his eyes. He sits back, resting his head back against the headrest.

Deep breath in… deep breath out…

He keeps track of his breathing, helping him calm down. After a minute, he opens his eyes. He blinks a few times, looking around him.

He's somewhere on the edge of town. There's nothing but trees. Steve isn't quite sure of how he got here… he remembers driving away from school but doesn't remember what turns he took.

His tongue pokes out, wetting his lips. Then, he realizes the engine's still running. He turns it off, trying to figure out how long he's been sitting here. But when he left school, he didn't know what time it was.

Now what happens?

He sighs.

I just argued with then kissed my best friend.

I kissed my best friend.

Steve knows he did this, but he doesn't feel anything. He feels drained. Empty. The day's been such an emotional roller coaster that one good breakdown has drained him of all emotional capability.

And he doesn't know what happens next.

They'll definitely talk about this at some point. This is just too big to ignore. He definitely can't ignore this forever.

Though… now that he thinks about it, that kiss was nice. Jonathan hadn't really reciprocated, but it was still nice. Jonathan's lips were warm and a little chapped. His eyes shut, and he sniffles softly.

That'll be the only time I'll kiss him .

He laugh pathetically, wiping his nose on the back of his hand.

"That's it," he says, out loud. His voice is shaky, and he doesn't even want to imagine what he looks like right now.

"That's it." His voice is raspy too; strained from the harsh sobs.

His bitter laugh tapers off into a hiccup. Tears come to his eyes again. Turns out he wasn't done freaking out just yet.

Notes for the Chapter:

> D-D-D-D-D-D-D-D-DDDAAMMNNN DUDE that was intense. hope yall liked it and we're hitting the beginning of the end c:

9. Tapping

Notes for the Chapter:

> wHoops i was going to post this like four days ago. but there's one more chapter left then an epilogue!!! and i'm working on another multichaptered fic that should be going up sometime mid january!!

A knock on the car window startles him out of his half-asleep still-freaking-out-internally daze. He blinks a few times, coming back to reality. For some unknown amount of time, he'd sat in his car, in his own thoughts. He didn't even know what he was thinking about, most of the time. He just zoned out and let his mind wander.

But the knock on the window startles him, and he nearly expects to see Jonathan. Instead, it's Dustin. He's got his headset on, looking at Steve with wide eyes. When Steve doesn't move, Dustin makes the 'roll-down-the-window' motion.

Steve unlocks the doors instead. Dustin rolls his eyes, rounding the car and throwing open the passenger door.

"What the hell happened?"

Well that's a loaded question -- Steve thinks for the second time today.

"What?" He blinks slowly. His mind is working overtime in order to try and figure out what he's talking about.

Dustin climbs in, and shuts the car door behind him.

"Something happened between you and Jonathan." Dustin turns to face Steve. As he speaks, he pushes his headset off and reaches into his pocket to turn it off. "Jonathan is freaking out, making Nancy freak out, and neither of them are telling us what happened. Then, I found out you bolted."

"Why did you--"

"I found you because I know you, and if *Jonathan's* freaking out, then

you must be a trainwreck." Dustin cuts him off.

Steve scoffs. "Wow, that's just what I want to hear right now…"

Well he's not wrong. You kissed your best friend, nearly threw up, and bolted .

"Well I'm sorry, but I'm not wrong. You look like shit."

Steve gives Dustin a cold glare out of the corner of his eye. Dustin just shrugs.

"So what happened?"

"I kissed Jonathan." There's no beating around the bush with Dustin. "We fought… over the weekend. He told me that him and Nancy were together… I blew up, and got bitter about Nancy and I never talking about how things ended between us. I told him to leave, and last night he tried talking to me again."

He pauses, running a hand over his face. He leans forward, resting an arm on the steering wheel. He keeps a hand over his eyes.

"My mom was home, and I told him to leave again."

Dustin's eyes widen a little at the mention of Steve's mom. He stays silent though.

"And today, I blew up again… I got mad that we just didn't talk about anything that happened. He asked if I still loved her."

"Do you?"

"I do. I don't think I ever got over her." Steve lowers his hand, and meets Dustin's eye. "He asked me what was wrong, and I just… I kissed him. Didn't even think about it before I did."

Dustin slowly nods. "Fuck."

"Yeah," Steve airily laughs. His eyes drift away from Dustin. "I know. I just completely fucked everything up."

Dustin purses his lips, looking away.

“What do I do?” Steve glances over at Dustin, and the two just stare at each other.

“I don’t know.”

After a few minutes of silence, Steve starts the car back up. He pulls back up to the road, and starts to drive back in the direction of town.

For a second, he wonders how far he would’ve gone if he hadn’t stopped. The thought of just driving away seems awfully appealing right now though…

The trees start to break intermediately with buildings. Steve sighs.

“Did they say anything?” He asks. Dustin snaps out of whatever daze he was in; he makes a confused noise and looks away from the window.

“Did they say anything?” Steve repeats.

“Not really…” Dustin shrugs a shoulder. “She asked me to find you though.”

Steve nearly slams on the breaks as a gut reaction. Instead, he accidentally blows through a stop sign. Thank god the road’s empty.

“ *What* ?!” It comes out a hell of a lot higher than he thought; it’s high pitched and strung out.

“She asked me to find you.” Dustin explains. “I would’ve looked anyway… but she asked me to.”

Steve feels nauseous again.

It’s too soon to talk about this. He’s had enough of a fucking rollercoaster today that he doesn’t want to think about talking to them about the kiss. He doesn’t know when or even *if* he’ll be ready to talk about the kiss, but he knows he sure as hell isn’t ready.

“Okay…” He swallows thickly. “Did she give you a reason why?”

Dustin shakes his head. Steve purses his lips, unsure of how to feel about her request.

They’re in the heart of Hawkins now. Kids are biking on the side of the street in packs. A few are walking around with their dogs. Cars dot the streets. It’s familiar like home, but in this moment Steve feels like this has never been *his* home.

They pass through the center of town. Steve turns into Dustin’s neighborhood.

Dustin says nothing as Steve slows to a stop in front of his house. He doesn’t make a move to get out, and Steve raises an eyebrow.

Steve’s lips part, but Dustin beats him to it.

“If they talk to you, are you going to tell them how you feel?”

Steve freezes. He had barely thought about that. He had been too caught up in the actual kiss to think about the conversation that’s meant to follow. At this point, there’s absolutely no way he can lie about his feelings. Nobody kisses their best friend and doesn’t have feelings for them.

“I will.” Steve shakily nods.

“Promise?” Dustin raises an eyebrow.

“I promise.” Steve nods again. Dustin nods too, and then he gets out of the car. Neither of them say goodbye.

The thrum of the shower’s spray on his back keeps him grounded. If it weren’t for the water, he’d be having another freakout. Now his mind is blank as the water runs down his back. It doesn’t feel all that

well, but it's better than having another attack. He didn't need his mom breathing down his neck if she caught him having a panic attack. He had just barely dodged her questions when he got home.

He told her he had driven Dustin home from school. By the time his freakout was over and he had driven Dustin home, school had ended for the day.

She had just smiled, told him that she hoped he had a good day, and disappeared into the kitchen. Steve had watched her walk away, then he went upstairs and immediately got into the shower.

Taking a shower always helped him calm down. The steam cleared his breathing; the water on his back kept him grounded; scrubbing himself down got him feeling something.

At this point, he doesn't know how long he's been in here. He scrubbed himself down with some soap a while ago, and had yet to shampoo his hair. His mind was too busy wandering to think about personal hygiene. He was thinking about what's going to happen next.

What will he say to them?

What happens… if he tells them how he feels, and they reject him?

Then I guess my only friends will be middle schoolers.

That was a depressing thought.

He figures he'll cross that bridge when he gets there. Some small part of his mind was telling him that it will all work out. But Nancy's made it clear she doesn't love him, and he doubts Jonathan's queer… and he *really* doubts that they'd be down for some kind of three-way relationship.

He's never heard of a three person relationship. It wasn't normal, really, making him doubt on whether or not they'd be willing to try one. Sure, the things they've done are far outside the bounds of 'normal'. Hell, maybe they'd cancel, like some kind of math problem.

Two 'weird's make a normal, right? Isn't that the saying?

He sighs, reaching for the shampoo bottle.

Like hell they'd be into me .

Steve's feeling pretty clear-headed when he steps out of the shower. Steam fogs the mirror, and he wipes it away.

He looks a lot better, he likes to think. He doesn't know what he looked like when Dustin found him, but the tear-stained cheeks and red eyes have disappeared. There's still dark smudges under his eyes, but those have been there for months now.

He licks his lips, then starts to towel off.

He somehow gets through a slightly painful dinner with his mom. She had noticed something was off with him and asked. Steve had dodged it completely, saying something about being stressed about an upcoming project. If it weren't for the current relationship drama, he actually would be stressed about it.

But it seems that school and all other responsibilities have taken to the back burner of his mind.

He dodges all other questions she has, stuff about school and the kids, and ducks upstairs the second he's done with the dishes. He shuts the door, and even though he's not tired he flops on the bed and pulls the covers up around him.

All he'd like to do right now is sleep, and quite possibly he wishes he'd never wake up.

Something taps against the window. Steve barely stirs.

Another tap, louder this time. Steve groans, rolling over and burying his face in the pillow.

Another tap. Finally, Steve opens his eyes. He rolls back over, squinting at the window.

Another tap. Steve realizes somebody's throwing stones against his window.

He sits up, eyebrows furrowed. A glance at the clock reads nearly three in the morning.

What the fuck…?

He pushes the covers off and swings his legs over the side of the bed. Another rock taps against his window, and he huffs in annoyance. He crosses the room to the window, and he pulls back the curtains with a sharp tug.

He blinks a few times, and sees a figure standing in the middle of his yard. His eyes narrow, and he realizes that it's Nancy, standing there in the middle of the yard with her hands full of stones. He rubs his eyes, a little convinced that he's imagining things. But she's still there, looking up at his window like she's in some cheesy teen movie.

He scans the street, and sees Jonathan's car parked across the street from his house.

A pit in his stomach opens up, and he realizes there's probably no escaping this. She saw him pull back the curtain, and if he gets back in bed she'll just keep throwing stones. Nancy Wheeler is persistent and stubborn when she needs to be.

With a sigh, he hastily pulls on some clothes. The tapping has paused, but he assumes she's still out on the lawn.

He tries to be as quiet as possible as he sneaks downstairs. Fortunately, his mom sleeps like the dead.

Quietly, he opens the front door and slips out. And he stands correct, she's still out on the lawn. There's still a stone in her hands, but she lets it drop when she sees him.

“You had to pick three in the morning to talk?” Steve whispers, holding back a yawn as he crosses the lawn to her.

“We couldn’t sleep.” She says. Steve swallows thickly.

That ‘ *we’* implies that the two of them spent the night together, and that doesn’t really settle well with Steve.

“Oh.” He says, feeling a little stupid all of the sudden.

Nancy glances over her shoulder, to Jonathan’s car. As his eyes adjust to the darkness, Steve can see Jonathan’s silhouette in the driver’s seat.

“Are we going to talk…?” Steve asks, looking back over at Nancy. She nods, and starts to walk over to the car. Steve follows her hesitantly. With each step, the pit opens up more.

By the time he’s sitting in the backseat of Jonathan’s car, he feels like the pit in his stomach is going to consume him. But he takes a deep breath, letting Jonathan drive them off to some unknown location.

Notes for the Chapter:

> Changed my tumblr url to match my AO3 name, so here's the new link to it.

10. By the River

Notes for the Chapter:

> YIKES guys sorry for such a long wait!!! I had to do a lot of editing for this chapter and due to a lot of stuff going on in my personal life finding the motivation to do so was hard... whooops.... but I hope you like this chapter, this is the last one before a little epilogue!!
> (also this chapter is essentially all dialogue. whoops but it was needed)

They drive for awhile. The radio's not on, and nobody's speaking. The silence is thick.

Steve zones out easily. He quickly gets too wrapped up in his thoughts as he forces himself to remain calm.

Now is not the time to be freaking out. He repeats in his head constantly, making sure his breathing is steady.

His eyes are closed. He can hear their breathing from the front seats, reminding him that they're still there. It makes his stomach flip every so often, knowing that there is no way he's going to get out of this.

Eventually the car stops, and Steve opens his eyes.

They're on the banks of the river, about thirty feet from the water. Jonathan turns off the engine, and lets out a soft sigh.

Steve doesn't know how to feel in this moment. The little somersaults his stomach had been doing have stopped, leaving a deep pit in the middle of his gut.

Jonathan gets out, and Nancy follows. Steve's a little confused, but he follows anyway. The three walk to the edge of the river, and sit down on the grass; Steve in the middle. Jonathan is on his left, Nancy on his right.

Neither of them say anything for a minute. The half moon casts the

world in a faint white glow. The river's rushing in front of them and it's the part of the night where even the bugs are asleep.

Steve wrings his hands together nervously.

It's now or never.

"So are we going to talk about this?" He bites the bullet. Then he feels two pairs of eyes on him. He keeps his eyes on the water. He's not so sure he can keep it together if he's looking at either one of them. He doesn't see them share a look.

"I told Nancy about what happened." Jonathan's voice is soft, and vulnerable. God Steve can already tell he might cry a bit at some point.

Which part? Steve thinks. *The fight or the kiss* ?

"All of it," Jonathan tacks on, as if he can read Steve's thoughts.

"I'm sorry," Nancy's voice is quiet. She puts a hand on Steve's back, making him jolt without thinking. He can feel his resolve shake.

"I'm sorry we never talked," she says.

"What happened?" Steve asks. He figures they should start there; maybe work their way chronologically through all of their relationship issues. "I know it had to do with Barb, but what happened the night you two went to that investigator?"

His eyes stay on the water, causing him to miss them sharing another look.

"We… uh.." Jonathan awkwardly coughs. "Realized how we felt that night. We got together then."

Steve wants to feel bitter, since that was merely days after him and Nancy had their talk outside the gym. It made it sound as if Jonathan was her rebound. But Steve swallows the bitterness that wants to rise in his throat. He doesn't want this to escalate.

Steve slowly nods, trying his best to keep steady. "Okay… how come

we never talked?"

"I don't know." If Nancy's voice wasn't so serious, Steve would've scoffed and called it bullshit. But he knows that tone. She is being honest, hiding no ulterior motive or holding anything back.

"Okay," Steve repeats. "Did you mean what you said, at the party?"

"I don't think so," she shakes her head. Her hand is still on his back. "I've thought about it a lot Steve, and I'm sorry."

Steve finally looks up from the water, meeting Nancy's eye.

"I know that doesn't change what happened, but I feel awful for doing that to you…" She trails off, and Steve knows she doesn't need to finish that sentence. There's a lot she did to him without even realizing.

He wants to ask her more about this. Why she didn't come forward, why she didn't apologize sooner, why she let it go on this long. He holds his tongue though. This isn't about him and Nancy. Jonathan's here too.

There's still so much to work through. He wants to leave that door open, so they can talk about it again. Now they have to move on to what happened between him and Jonathan.

There's a few beats of silence as the conversation settles. Nancy's hand falls away from his back. Jonathan watches the two of them. Steve sighs.

"Are we going to talk about the kiss now?"

Both Jonathan and Nancy nod, and Steve runs a hand through his hair. He figures he'll take the blunt approach.

"I think I'm attracted to you," his eyes shift over to Jonathan.

"And... Nancy-- both of you--" he awkwardly tags on when neither of them say anything. He feels like the more he talks the stupider he sounds. He trails off, waiting for one of them to say something, *anything* .

“I never got over Nancy,” Steve looks at the water. “And.. I recently figured out how I felt about Jonathan.”

Neither of them have yet to say anything. Steve wants to jump into the river and let the current carry him away. A few beats of silence, and Steve laughs weakly and puts his head in his hands.

“I shouldn’t have said anything,” he mutters. “I shouldn’t have kissed you, I shouldn’t have gotten mad--”

Jonathan sets a hand on his arm, and he immediately shuts up. His teeth clack together with how sharply he shuts his jaw. He lowers his hands a fraction, and through his fingers he meets Jonathan’s eyes.

“It’s okay,” his voice is still calm. Steve doesn’t know how Jonathan can be so calm when his own heart is racing and he’s on the verge of breaking down what feels like the thousandth time today.

“I understand why you were upset earlier,” Jonathan glances up at Nancy. She nods at him, and Jonathan’s eyes flick back to Steve’s. “Nancy and I have talked a lot about our relationship… we didn’t tell you because we didn’t know how you’d react… and we also had a lot to work through ourselves.”

“I’m sorry for blowing up,” Steve weakly says. He knows he sounds pathetic.

“It’s okay,” Jonathan repeats. He pauses for a second.

“And… the feelings are okay too.”

Excuse me, what?

“What?” Steve croaks out.

A small smile crosses Jonathan’s lips. The flat look in his eyes melts to something warm, and he shares a look with Nancy. Steve glances at her, and she’s got the same warm look.

What the fuck…?

“I thought you with that bat was pretty incredible.” Jonathan’s words

take on amused tone.

Steve's at a loss for words. If he opens his mouth, he knows that nothing will come out but broken noises.

"You've taken a lot of pictures too," Nancy admits.

Steve's brain short circuits.

Jonathan chuckles. "So many…" he says as if he's reminiscing. "I don't know how you haven't noticed."

I thought-... Steve's thoughts are so scattered he can't put together anything coherent.

"And I don't think I ever got over you either." It's Nancy's turn to admit the truth. Steve looks over at her, his hands slowly lowering. They're shaking.

"We were all so caught up with everything that was going on… I guess I pushed down the doubts I had." Nancy bites her bottom lip. She looks at the ground for a few seconds.

"What are you trying to say?" Steve sniffles, voice weak and shaky. *Don't start crying, don't start crying…*

"That it's okay," Jonathan takes one of Steve's hands. Nancy takes the other. Steve's eyes lock on their hands; holding his tight enough to stop the shakes.

"I don't understand," Steve shakes his head.

He's half tempted to pull his hands out of their grasp. They have to be humoring him, he's convinced. There's no way this would happen.

I must be dreaming .

"What do you mean 'it's okay'?" He sniffles again. His eyes start to burn with tears. "It's not normal-- I love you *both* , and I think I'm queer, and--" the first tear falls, "I want to be with both of you."

He lets out a weak, half-sob half-hiccup.

Jonathan tucks a few fingers under his chin. He tilts Steve's head upwards, and they meet eyes. Their eyes lock, and Steve's launched back to that dream. He remembers the fuzzy warmth of that dream, and how in an instant it vanished. The second he was awake, the warm look Jonathan had given him disappeared into thin air.

That warm look was the same one he's got on now, and Steve barely registers the weak sob that slips from his lips.

"It's okay," Jonathan whispers. He leans in close. Steve's breath hitches. Nancy's still got his hand.

Their lips connect, and Steve cries against Jonathan's lips.

Just like their first kiss, Jonathan's lips are warm and slightly chapped. He thought the first kiss was incredible, but this isn't on the same level. It's overwhelming, yet Steve feels at peace. He's the most relaxed he's been in months.

The kiss breaks after what feels like decades.

Jonathan pulls away, eyes slowly opening. Steve's opens too, a few tears slipping out.

From how close they are, Steve picks up details about Jonathan he's never noticed before. The depths of his eyes, faded barely-there freckles on his nose, how a few dirty blonde strands of hair always fall in front of his eyes.

He lets out a little sob. His body shakes, and he clutches onto Nancy's hand like a lifeline.

The fingers under his chin slip away. Jonathan's eyes look glassy in the moonlight and his smile is warm.

"Do I get a kiss like that?" Nancy asks. A shaky laugh rips out from his throat.

"Yes, yes absolutely," he nods furiously.

Nancy's lips are familiar, but are no less special.

They get back in the car at some point. A clock on the dashboard reads four thirty in the morning. They've got school tomorrow, but none of them could care less.

Steve sits in the backseat. This time, he feels a lot less somber; he's content.

They haven't left the riverside yet. Jonathan has turned on the heat, and that's about all they've done.

"I didn't think this would ever happen," Steve confesses. He's starting to get tired again; the jittery adrenaline of anxiety was fading, leaving him wiped out. It didn't help that he was woken up by rocks hitting his window. But he's not too annoyed.

In the front seat, Jonathan lets out an airy laugh. Nancy turns in her seat, facing Steve.

"What do you mean?" She asks.

"I didn't think I'd ever get to kiss you two." Steve runs a hand through his hair. His head lolls back against the seat. "I had a dream, actually. A few weeks ago."

God, he knows he's going to regret this in the morning, but he's too fucking tired and happy to care. His chest is filled with something warm-- like the fuzzy warm of a blanket fresh out of the dryer.

"I had a dream about you two," he continues when neither of them say anything. "I was kissing Nancy, and… and Jonathan came in. He was about to kiss me. I wasn't freaked out though… and when I woke up I realized just how-- how I felt."

He makes some weird gesture with his hand, half motioning at his chest, and half at the two in the front seat.

“I’ve known for awhile,” Jonathan’s voice is soft. He glances up in the rearview mirror, meeting Steve’s eyes through it. Steve can only see Jonathan’s eyes, but he knows the other has got on a warm smile.

“Since last year, actually.” Jonathan brushes a few strands of hair out of his eyes. “The first time we beat the Demogorgon.”

“I had both of you,” Nancy laughs. She tilts her head, resting it on the headrest. Her eyes flick between the two. “Steve was the whole time… it took a bit with you Jonathan.”

She reaches across the center console, taking Jonathan’s hand gently. His eyes glance down at their hands, and his smile breaks open, showing off his teeth.

“So does this mean we’re together?” Steve asks, holding in a yawn. His eyes are shut and he feels seconds away from drifting off.

He doesn’t see the two upfront share a look, but he feels a warm hand settle on his knee.

“We want to be.” Jonathan speaks for him and Nancy. The question attached to that doesn’t need to be said. Steve nods without a drop of hesitation.

“Yes, absolutely,” he says, trying to be enthusiastic as possible despite being so drained.

Jonathan chuckles at his tone. He puts the key in the ignition and starts the car. He doesn’t start to drive just yet though.

“I’m bad at love, I really am. So I’m sorry if I’m kind of wreck.” Steve suddenly blurts. There’s something raw in his tone. He’s masking nothing, just putting his cards on the table for them to see. “But can you blame me for trying though? Look at you two.”

He lazily gestures to the two of them. Jonathan and Nancy smile twin smiles. In sync, they turn to look at Steve. Steve’s got on a tacky grin, eyes exhausted but warm.

“You’re beautiful. Both of you. So absolutely, absolutely yes.” He nods once, with some weird sort of finality, like he’s trying to

convince himself that this is really real. His eyelids are heavy, and he looks two seconds away from falling asleep on them.

“Good…” Jonathan chuckles a little. He turns to face forward once more. “Now let’s get you home before you pass out on us.”

Steve can practically *hear* his smirk. He laughs sleepily, nodding.

“Yeah… sounds good.”

Nancy chuckles. The hand on his leg doesn’t move as they start to drive off.

Maybe it’s just Steve’s sleepy delusional mind, but he feels the happiest he’s been in such a long time.

11. Epilogue

Notes for the Chapter:

> I think I took so long to write this because I didn't want this fic to end...

The water's still cool, just starting to warm as it hit late June. Steve lets his fingers dip into the water as he lounges on a pool floaty. His shades were on, and he was sprawled on his back. The water cooled his back while the sun warmed his chest. The perfect balance.

A breeze ran through the trees, shaking the leaves and casting flickering shadows on the surface of the water.

He shifts, his hands slipping off the edge of the floaty and into the water. It was the perfect first day of being a high school graduate.

He still can't grasp that yesterday was his last time in Hawkins High, finally walking across that stage. He can't believe that it finally happened. He finally did it. It doesn't help that the last few months have been a blur.

Officially dating Jonathan and Nancy was as good as he had hoped it would be, if not better. They were incredible.

And his mom had finally talked to him about his father. They were working through a divorce, having nasty fights over who got what. Custody had been a brief battle, but when he hit 18 the subject was dropped.

It had been good news. She told him a week before he graduated, and he felt like that was the best graduation gift she could've given him. When he had asked her if she'll be around more, she said she was going to do her best. Without his father around, there was little reason to stay away.

He had then told her how the past few months have felt. No mentions of the Upside Down, just the lonely house that felt too big for just him.

The gate creaks, drawing him out of his thoughts.

He opens his eyes, trying his best to sit up without tipping the floaty. He sees who's opening the gate, and a megawatt smile breaks out across his lips.

"Nancy! Jonathan!"

The two smile back. Jonathan pushes the gate shut behind him as Nancy walks around the side of the pool. She's got sunglasses on as well, a bright blue pair that match the blue and white polka dot bikini she's got on. Steve's seen it before, but it still amazes him with how stunning it makes her look.

Behind her, Jonathan looks a little more awkward. He's wearing a pair of swim trunks, looking mildly uncomfortable.

And Steve looks like the goddamn sun to them. It's only a few days into summer but he's already growing a tan.

"The water's great," he says, beckoning them to join him.

Jonathan laughs a little, dropping his bag on one of the deck chairs. He finds Steve to be amusing. Steve knew they were coming over but he still acts happily surprised; like a puppy when his owner comes home. It's cute, and Jonathan's tempted to wade over to Steve and kiss that smile off his lips.

Nancy sets her bag next to Jonathan's, and wastes no time jumping in. She yelps a little; the water's a little colder than she expected.

"It's not that warm!" She yells, throwing a look to Steve. He shrugs, laying back down on the floaty.

"Maybe you're a wimp."

Nancy makes an offended noise, splashing Steve. Steve jolts, then screams a little when the floaty starts to tip.

" *Oh no no no no* -!" He yells, trying to save the floaty. But it dips sharply, and he goes face-first into the water.

Nancy and Jonathan break out in laughter. Nancy has to take off her sunglasses to wipe her eyes, and Jonathan's gut starts to hurt from laughing so hard.

Steve pops up from the water, his hair soaked and falling in front of his eyes. He looks like a drowned rat, making the two laugh harder.

"Yeah yeah, laugh it up…" Steve pouts.

But in all honesty, he's not that upset. Far from it really.

These past few months with Jonathan and Nancy has been the best time of Steve's life. They're wonderful. They go on dates, study together, hang out all the time, go on long drives around town…

Everything felt perfect.

Seeing them laugh so hard they're red makes his pout fade. He smiles again, even though he's got hair plastered to his face and chlorine in his eyes.

For the first time in a long time, he's not scared of what the future holds for him. He's ready for it, knowing that they'll be right there with him.

Notes for the Chapter:

> so thank you guys so much for commenting and reading and loving this!!!! This fic was so much fun to write, and it got even better because all of you kept showing love! It made my day each time I read a comment.
> now i'll be tacky and link to my new fic. Just the first chapter is up right now, and it'll be awhile until I post the the second since I'm still writing the story. so go show that some love since it's a stonthan fic with some greek gods involved c; here's the link!!

Author's Note:

If you want to talk to me, hit me up on my tumblr!